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THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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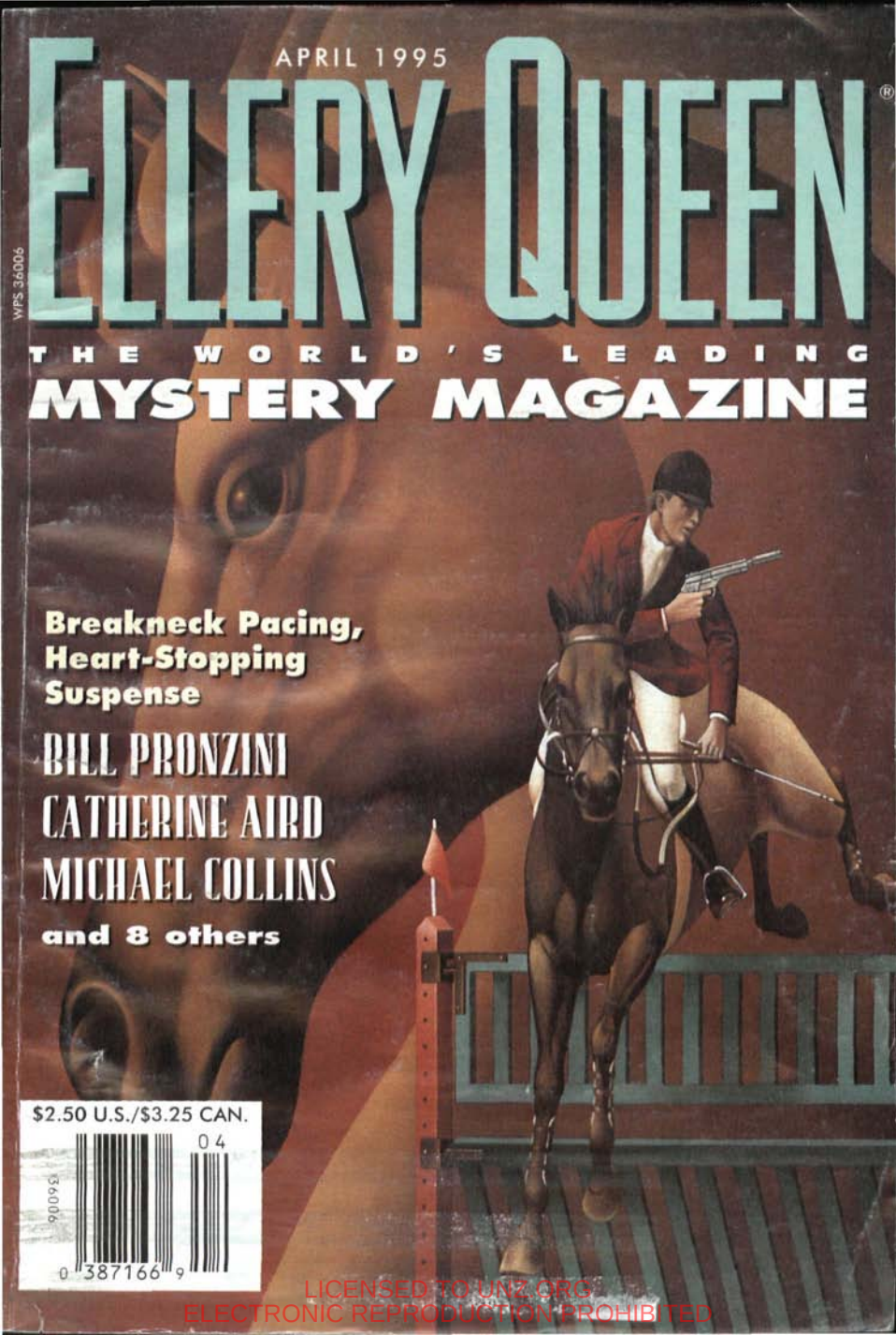

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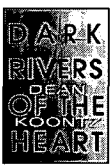

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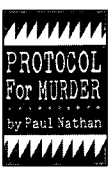

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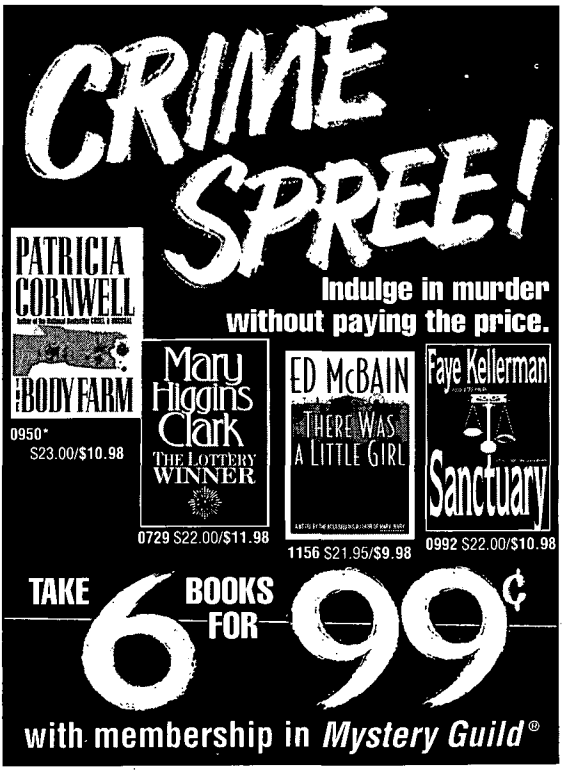

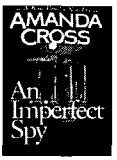

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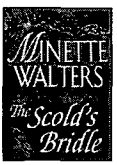

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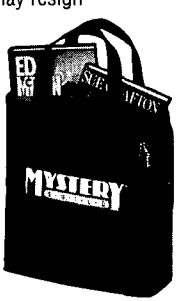

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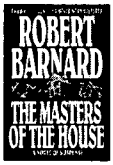

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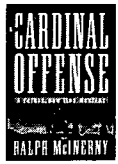

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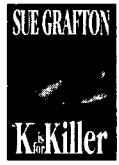

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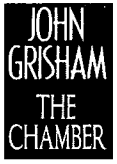

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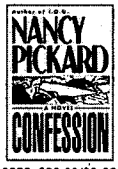

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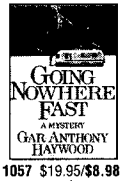

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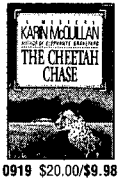

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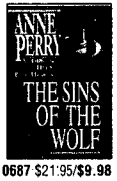

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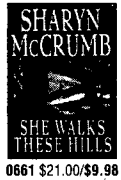

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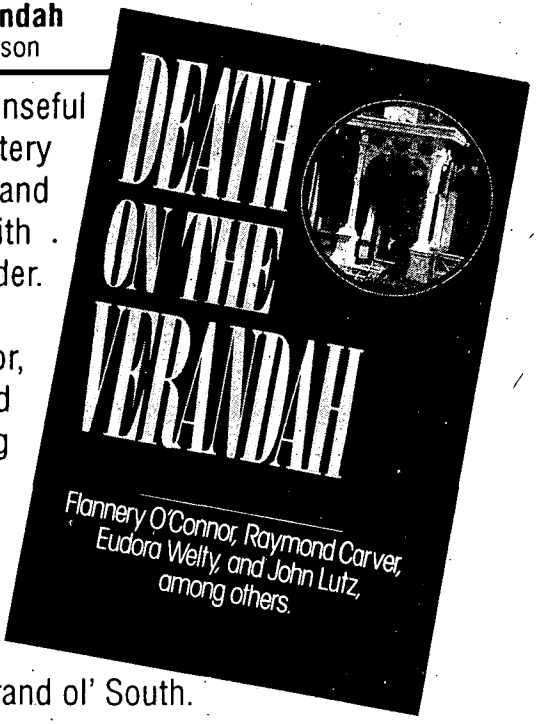

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Bill Pronzini is one of the crime genre's most prolific writers, but nothing in his impressive output has brought him more recognition than the Nameless Detective series he began in 1969 with a short story he later expanded into the novel The Snatch. *Mr. Pronzini's Nameless private-eye is still going strong, working the streets of San Francisco in cases like the one that brings him to Dolores Park . . .*

ONE NIGHT AT DOLORES PARK

by BILL PRONZINI

Dolores Park used to be the hub of one of the better residential neighborhoods in San Francisco: acres of tall palms and steeply rolling lawns in the Western Mission, a gentrifying area up until a few years ago. Well-off Yuppies, lured by sweeping views and an easy commute to downtown, bought and renovated many of the old Victorians that rim the park. Singles and couples, straights and gays, moved into duplexes that sold for $300,000 and apartments that rented for upwards of a grand a month. WASPs, Latinos, Asian Americans . . . an eclectic mix that lived pretty much in harmony and were dedicated to preserving as much of the urban good life as was left these days.

Then the drug dealers moved in.

Marijuana sellers at first, aiming their wares at students at nearby Mission High School. The vanguard's success brought in a scruffier variety and their equally scruffy customers. As many as forty dealers allegedly had been doing business in Dolores Park on recent weekends, according to published reports. The cops couldn't do much; marijuana selling and buying is a low-priority crime in

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the city. But the lack of control, the wide-open, open-air market, brought in fresh troops: heroin and crack dealers. And where you've got hard drugs, you also have high stakes and violence. Eight shootings and two homicides in and around Dolores Park so far this year. The firebombing of the home of a young couple who tried to form an activist group to fight the dealers. Muggings, burglaries, intimidation of residents. The result was bitterly predictable: frightened people moving out, real-estate values dropping, and as the dealers widened their territory to include Mission Playground down on 19th Street, the entire neighborhood beginning to decline. The police had stepped up patrols and were making arrests, but it was too little too late: They didn't have the manpower or the funds, and there was so damned much of the same thing happening elsewhere in the city.

"It's like Armageddon," one veteran cop was quoted as saying. "And the forces of evil are winning."

They were winning tonight, no question of that. It was a warm October night and I had been staked out on the west side of the park, nosed downhill near the intersection of Church and 19th, since a few minutes before six o'clock. Before it got dark I had counted seven drug transactions within the limited range of my vision—and no police presence other than a couple of cruising patrol cars. Once darkness closed down, the park had emptied fast. Now, at nine-ten, the lawns and paths appeared deserted. But I wouldn't have wanted to walk around over there, as early as it was. If there were men lurking in the shadows—and there probably were—they were dealers armed to the teeth and/or desperate junkies hunting prey. Only damned fools wandered through Dolores Park after nightfall.

Drugs, drug dealers, and the rape of a fine old neighborhood had nothing to do with why I was here; all of those things were a depressing by-product. I was here to serve a subpoena on a man named Thurmond, as a favor to a lawyer I knew. Thurmond was being sought for testimony in a huge stock-fraud case. He didn't want to testify because he was afraid of being indicted himself, and he had been hiding out as a result. It had taken me three days to find out he was holed up with an old college buddy. The college buddy owned the blue and white Stick Victorian two doors down Church Street from where I was sitting. He was home—I'd seen him arrive, and there were lights on now behind the curtained bay windows—but there was still no sign of Thurmond. I was bored as well as depressed, and irritated, and frustrated. If Thurmond gave me any

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trouble when he finally put in an appearance, he was going to be sorry for it.

That was what I was thinking when I saw the woman.

She came down 19th, alone, walking fast and hard. The stride and the drawn-back set of her body said she was angry about something. There was a streetlight on the corner, and when she passed under it I could see that she was thirtyish, dark-haired, slender. Wearing a light sweater over a blouse and slacks. She waited for a car to roll by—it didn't slow—and then crossed the street toward the path.

Not smart, lady, I thought. Even if she was a junkie looking to make a connection, it wasn't smart. I had been slouched down on my spine; I sat up straighter to get a better squint at where she was headed. Not into the park, at least. Away from me on the sidewalk, downhill toward Cumberland. Moving at the same hard, angry pace.

I had a fleeting impulse to chase after her, tell her to get her tail off the street. Latent paternal instinct. Hell, if she wanted to risk her life, that was her prerogative; the world is full of what the Newspeakers call "cerebrally challenged individuals." It was none of my business what happened to her—

Yes, it was.

Right then it became my business.

A line of trees and shrubs flanked the sidewalk where she was, with a separating strip of lawn about twenty yards wide. The tall figure of a man came jerkily out of the tree shadow as she passed. There was enough starlight and other light for me to make out something extended in one hand and that his face was covered except for the eyes and mouth. Gun and ski mask. Mugger.

I hit the door handle with my left hand, jammed my right up under the dash, and yanked loose the .38 I keep clipped there. He was ten yards from her and closing as I came out of the car; she'd heard him and was turning toward him. He lunged forward, clawing for her purse.

There were no cars on the street. I charged across at an angle, yelling at the top of my voice the only words that can have an effect in a situation like this: "Hold it, police officer!" Not this time. His head swiveled in my direction, swiveled back to the woman as she pulled away from him. She made a keening noise and turned to run.

He shot her.

No compunction: just threw the gun up and fired point-blank.

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She went down, skidding on her side, as I cut through two parked cars onto the sidewalk. Rage made me pull up and I would have fired at him except that he pumped a round at me first. I saw the muzzle flash, heard the whine of the bullet and the low, flat crack of the gun, and in reflex I dodged sideways onto the lawn. Mistake, because the grass was slippery and my feet went out from under me. I stayed down, squirming around on my belly so I could bring the .38 into firing position. But he wasn't going to stick around for a shootout; he was already running splayfooted toward the trees. He disappeared into them before I could get lined up for a shot.

I'd banged my knee in the fall; it sent out twinges as I hauled myself erect, ran toward the woman. She was still down but not hurt as badly as I'd feared: sitting up on one hip now, holding her left arm cradled in against her breast. She heard me, looked up with fright shining on the pale oval of her face. I said quickly, "It's all right, I'm a detective, he's gone now," and shoved the .38 into my jacket pocket. There was no sign of the mugger. The park was empty as far as I could see, no movement anywhere in the warm dark.

She said, "He shot me," in a dazed voice.

"Where? Where are you hurt?"

"My arm. . . ."

"Shoulder area?"

"No, above the elbow."

"Can you move the arm?"

"I don't . . . yes, I can move it."

Not too bad then. "Can you stand up, walk?"

"If you help me. . . ."

I put an arm around her waist, lifted her. The blood was visible then, gleaming wetly on the sleeve of her sweater.

"My purse," she said.

It was lying on the sidewalk nearby. I let go of her long enough to pick it up. When I gave it to her she clutched it tightly: something solid and familiar to hang onto.

The street was still empty; so were the sidewalks on both sides. Somebody was standing behind a lighted window in one of the buildings across Church, peering through a set of drapes. No one else seemed to have heard the shots, or to want to know what had happened if they did.

Just the woman and me out here at the edge of the light. And the predators—one predator, anyway—hiding somewhere in the dark.

* * *

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Her name was Andrea Hull, she said, and she lived a few doors up 19th Street. I took her home, walking with my arm around her and her body braced against mine as if we were a pair of lovers. Get her off the street as quickly as possible, to where she would feel safe. I could report the shooting from there. You have to go through the motions even when there's not much chance of results.

Her building was a one-story, stucco-faced duplex. As we started up the front stoop, she drew a shuddering breath and said, "God, he could have killed me," as if the realization had just struck her. "I could be dead right now."

I had nothing to say to that.

"Peter was right, damn him," she said.

"Peter?"

"My husband. He keeps telling me not to go out walking alone at night and I keep not listening. I'm so smart, I am. Nothing ever happened, I thought nothing ever would. . . ."

"You learned a lesson," I said. "Don't hurt yourself any more than you already are."

"I hate it when he's right." We were in the vestibule now. She said, "It's the door on the left," and fumbled in her purse. "Where the hell did I put the damn keys?"

"Your husband's not home?"

"No. He's the reason I went out."

I found the keys for her, unlocked the door. Narrow hallway, a huge lighted room opening off it. The room had been enlarged by knocking out a wall or two. There was furniture in it but it wasn't a living room; most of it, with the aid of tall windows and a couple of skylights, had been turned into an artist's studio. A cluttered one full of paintings and sculptures and the tools to create them. An unclean one populated by a tribe of dust mice.

I took a better look at its owner as we entered the studio. Older than I'd first thought, at least thirty-five, maybe forty. A sharp-featured brunette with bright, wise eyes and pale lips. The wound in her arm was still bleeding, the red splotch grown to the size of a small pancake.

"Are you in much pain?" I asked her.

"No. It's mostly numb."

"You'd better get out of that sweater. Put some peroxide on the wound if you have it, then wrap a wet towel around it. That should do until the paramedics get here. Where's your phone?"

"Over by the windows."

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"You go ahead. I'll call the police."

". . . I thought *you* were a policeman."

"Not quite. Private investigator."

"What were you doing down by the park?"

"Waiting to serve a subpoena."

"Lord," she said. Then she asked, "Do you have to report what happened? They'll never catch the man, you know they won't."

"Maybe not, but yes, I have to report it. You want attention for that arm, don't you?"

"All right," she said. "Actually, I suppose the publicity will do me some good." She went away through a doorway at the rear.

I made the call. The cop I spoke to asked half a dozen pertinent questions, then told me to stay put, paramedics and a team of inspectors would be out shortly. Half-hour, maybe less, for the paramedics, I thought as I hung up. Longer for the inspectors. This wasn't an A-priority shooting. Perp long gone, victim not seriously wounded, situation under control. We'd just have to wait our turn.

I took a turn around the studio. The paintings were everywhere, finished and unfinished: covering the walls, propped in corners and on a pair of easels, stacked on the floor. They were all abstracts: bold lines and interlocking and overlapping squares, wedges, and triangles in primary colors. Not to my taste, but they appeared to have been done by a talented artist. You couldn't say the same for the forty or so bronze, clay, and metal sculptures. All of those struck me as amateurish, lopsided things that had no identity or meaning, like the stuff kids make free-form in grade school.

"Do you like them? My paintings?"

I turned. Andrea Hull had come back into the room, wearing a sleeveless blouse now, a thick towel wrapped around her arm.

"Still bleeding?" I asked her.

"Not so badly now. *Do* you like my paintings?"

"I don't know much about art, but they seem very good."

"They are. Geometric abstraction. Not as good as Mondrian or Glarner or Burgoyne Diller, perhaps. Or Hofmann, of course. But not derivative, either. I have my own unique vision."

She might have been speaking a foreign language. I said, "Uh-huh," and let it go at that.

"I've had several showings, been praised by some of the most eminent critics in the art world. I'm starting to make a serious name for myself—finally, after years of struggle. Just last month one of

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my best works, 'Tension and Emotion,' sold for fifteen thousand dollars."

"That's a lot of money."

"Yes, but my work will bring much more someday."

No false modesty in her. Hell, no modesty of any kind. "Are the sculptures yours too?"

She made a snorting noise. "Good God, no. My husband's. Peter thinks he's a brilliant sculptor but he's not—he's not even mediocre. Self-delusion is just one of his faults."

"Sounds like you don't get along very well."

"Sometimes we do. And sometimes he makes me so damn mad I could scream. Tonight, for instance. Calling me from some bar downtown, drunk, bragging about a woman he'd picked up. He *knows* that drives me crazy."

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, not the business with the woman. Another one of his lies, probably. It's the drinking and the taunting that gets to me—his jealousy. He's so damned jealous I swear his skin is developing a green tint."

"Of your success, you mean?"

"That's right."

"Why do you stay married to him if he has that effect on you?"

"Habit," she said. "There's not much love left, but I do still care for him. God knows why. And of course he stays because now there's money, with plenty more in the offing . . . *oh!* Damn!" She'd made the mistake of trying to gesture with her wounded arm. "Where're those paramedics?"

"They'll be here pretty quick."

"I need a drink. Or don't you think I should have one?"

"I wouldn't. They'll give you something for the pain."

"Well, they'd better hurry up. How about you? Do you want a drink?"

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself. Go ahead and sit down if you want. I'm too restless."

"I've been doing nothing but sitting most of the evening."

"I'm going to pace," she said. "I have to walk, keep moving, when I'm upset. I used to go into the park, walk for an hour or more, but with all the drug problems . . . and now a person isn't even safe on the sidewalk—"

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There was a rattling at the front door. Andrea Hull turned, scowling, in that direction. I heard the door open, bang closed; a male voice called, "Andrea?"

"In here, Peter."

The man who came duck-waddling in from the hall was a couple of inches over six feet, fair-haired, and pale except for red-blotched cheeks and forehead. Weak-chinned and nervous-eyed. He blinked at her, blinked at me, blinked at her again with his mouth falling open.

"My God, Andrea, what happened to you? That towel . . . there's blood on it . . . "

"I was mugged a few minutes ago. He shot me."

"*Shot* you? Who . . . ?"

"I told you, a mugger. I'm lucky to be alive."

"The wound . . . it's not serious . . ."

"No." She winced. "What's *keeping* those paramedics?"

He went to her, tried to wrap an arm around her shoulders. She pushed him away. "The man who did it," he said, "did you get a good look at him?"

"No. He was masked. This man chased him off."

Hull remembered me, turned, and came waddling over to where I was. "Thank God you were nearby," he said. He breathed on me, reaching for my hand. I let him have it but not for long. "But I don't think I've seen you before. Do you live in the neighborhood?"

"He's a private investigator," Andrea Hull said. "He was serving a subpoena on somebody. His name is Orenzi."

"No, it isn't," I said. I told them what it was, not that either of them cared.

"I can never get Italian names right," she said.

Her husband shifted his attention her way again. "Where did it happen? Down by the park, I'll bet. You went out walking by the park again."

"Don't start in, Peter, I'm in no mood for it."

"Didn't I warn you something like this might happen? A hundred times I've warned you but you just won't listen."

"I said don't start in. If you hadn't called drunk from that bar, got me upset, I wouldn't have gone out. It's as much your fault as it is mine."

"*My* fault? Oh sure, blame me. Twist everything around so you don't have to take responsibility."

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Her arm was hurting her and the pain made her vicious. She bared her teeth at him. "What are you doing home, anyway? Where's the bimbo you claimed you picked up?"

"I brushed her off. I kept thinking about what I said on the phone, what a jerk I was being. I wanted to apologize—"

"Sure, right. You were drunk, now you're sober; if there was any brushing off, she's the one who did it."

"Andrea . . ."

"What's the matter with your face? She give you some kind of rash?"

"My face? There's nothing wrong with my face. . . ."

"It looks like a rash. I hope it isn't contagious."

"Damn you, Andrea—"

I'd had enough of this. The bickering, the hatred, the deception—everything about the two of them and their not-so-private little war. I said sharply, "All right, both of you shut up. I'm tired of listening to you."

They gawked at me, the woman in disbelief. "How dare you. You can't talk to me like that in my own home—"

"I can and I will. Keep your mouth closed and your ears open for five minutes and you'll learn something. Your husband and I will do the talking."

Hull said, "I don't have anything to say to you."

"Sure you do, Peter. You can start by telling me what you did with the gun."

"Gun? I don't . . . what gun?"

"The one you shot your wife with."

Him: hissing intake of breath.

Her: strangled bleating noise.

"That's right. No mugger, just you trying to take advantage of what's happened to the park and the neighborhood, make it look like a street killing."

Him: "That's a lie, a damn lie!"

Her, to me, in a ground-glass voice: "Peter? How can you know it was Peter? It was dark, the man wore a mask . . ."

"For openers, you told me he was drunk when he called you earlier. He wasn't, he was faking it. Nobody can sober up completely in an hour, not when he's standing here now without the faintest smell of alcohol on his breath. He wasn't downtown, either; he was somewhere close-by. The call was designed to upset you so you'd do

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what you usually do when you're upset—go out for a walk by the park.

"It may have been dark, but I still got a pretty good look at the shooter coming and going. Tall—and Peter's tall. Walked and ran splayfooted, like a duck—and that's how Peter walks. Then there are those blotches on his face. It's not a rash; look at the marks closely, Mrs. Hull. He's got the kind of skin that takes and retains imprints from fabric, right? Wakes up in the morning with pillow and blanket marks on his face? The ones he's got now are exactly the kind the ribbing on a ski mask would leave."

"You son of a bitch," she said to him. "You dirty rotten son of a—"

She went for him with nails flashing. I got in her way, grabbed hold of her; her injured arm stopped her from struggling with me. Then he tried to make a run for it. I let go of her and chased him and caught him at the front door. When he tried to kick me I knocked him on his skinny tail.

And with perfect timing, the doorbell rang. It wasn't just the paramedics, either; the law had also arrived.

Peter Hull was an idiot. He had the gun, a .32 revolver, *and* the ski mask in the trunk of his car.

She pressed charges, of course. She would have cut his throat with a dull knife if they'd let her have one. She told him so, complete with expletives.

The Hulls and their private war were finished.

Down in Dolores Park—and in the other neighborhoods in the city, and in cities throughout the country—the other war, the big one, goes on. Armageddon? Maybe. And maybe the forces of evil *are* winning. Not in the long run, though. In the long run, the forces of good will triumph. Always have, always will.

If I didn't believe that, I couldn't work at my job. Neither could anybody else in law enforcement.

No matter how bad things seem, we can't ever stop believing it.

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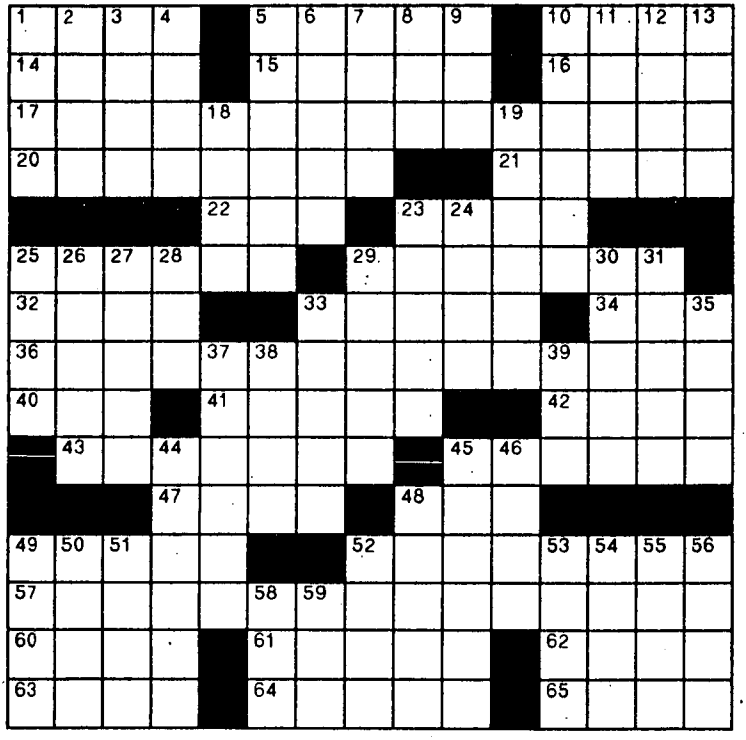
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Janet Lumiansky



Solution on page 42.

ACROSS

1. Eisenhower and namesakes
5. Creator of 43 across
10. Margerine containers
14. "Mon Oncle"
15. Volcano
16. Weapon
17. What dunit
20. Gear for 43 across
21. Stiff collars
22. Before noons (abbr.)
23. One of the three great B's
25. What 43 across may follow
29. West Coast engr. school
32. Poetic times
33. Porch
34. Le —— Soleil
36. What dunit
40. Mr. Whitney
41. Wooer
42. Small demons
43. Matt of *A Stab in the Dark*
45. Sign as a witness

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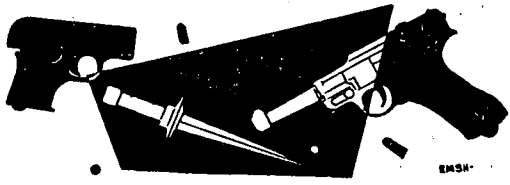
47. Hammer head
48. U N group
49. Trembly tree
52. Reddens
57. What dunit
60. Manor inhabitant
61. Our in Orly
62. Group of Stamps
63. Rams' mates
64. Endured
65. Dust or grass

DOWN

1. Yen
2. Knockout
3. And others
4. Hebrew letters
5. German town
6. Lascivious looks
7. Miss unable to lunch
8. Network
9. Krazy——
10. Chew some gum
11. What are you ——?
12. How have you ——?
13. They can be rolling
18. Type style (abbr.)
19. Feverishly active
23. Kind of clock
24. Wings
25. Before photo or gram
26. Staggers
27. Frolicsome
28. Mr. Kabibble
29. Wicker worker
30. Type of scene
31. Skirt Enhancers
33. Threshold
35. Part of MIT (abbr.)
37. Passionate
38. Stone or star
39. Small bird
44. Puts the bottom on the top
45. Ninth century king
46. Balsam
48. Precedes duce
49. Palindromic beginning
50. Decelerate
51. Uncontaminated
52. Words of proportion
53. Elec. units
54. Pith
55. Sicilian spa
56. Following ham or trick
58. The elected
59. —— in my backyard



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A newcomer to the mystery scene, Barbara Crossley has had two crime novels (The Candy Floss Coast *and* Rollercoaster) *published in the U.K. by Virago Press. Hers is an original voice that we feel confident you'll be hearing more of in the future . . .*

RIGHT BETWEEN THE EYES

by BARBARA CROSSLEY

So this was what it felt like to be shot, right between the eyes. Hanson Gray's vision cleared. His life was over.

How could he still be in his seat, no blood on the office floor? Why was his body still functioning inside its Austin Reed suit, when to all intents and purposes he was dying? Where was the smoking gun?

Simon Miles, oblivious to the explosion he'd just caused, sat opposite Hanson, his face a composite of embarrassment and grim implacability.

"You do understand why we're having to downsize?" he asked of Hanson's breathing corpse.

Hanson barely had it in him to croak, never mind reply.

"Because of difficult trading conditions and increased competition," parrotted Miles patiently. The words echoed emptily in Hanson's head, for all he was hearing was his inner voice: "I'm redundant. I'm forty-nine, I'll never get another job worth a damn. We can't exist without my salary, my pension plan doesn't mature for six years, there's no way I can disguise this as early retirement, and I'd never make enough as a consultant. What will I say at parties when people ask what I do? Nothing. I am nothing. I'm no one."

"Why me?" he managed to whimper, gathering his strength with the force of desperation. "I've given seventeen years to this company, I'm a senior accountant." The title sounded hollow even to Hanson's biased ears. "Don't experience and—and loyalty count for anything with you people?"

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Miles—whose career had progressed in two-year leaps from company to company—gave a placatory gesture. "Outplacement is a fact of commercial life these days, it's to do with the normal ebb and flow of business cycles, nothing personal, Hanson."

Nothing personal? Then why was he hurting in every molecule of his being, why did his brain feel about to implode? He was the one who'd have to go home and explain to Charlotte that life as they knew it was about to end—no more Caribbean at Christmas, no more antique buying, no more shooting parties. He was the one who'd have to take their sons out of private school and watch them sulk indoors, too ashamed to tell their friends the reason why. He was the one who'd have to suffer his parents' wordless sniff, which meant, "Of course, we expected this—you never did have enough drive." They'd never let him forget it, none of them would. What was to be their life after this death?—a scuffed semi, shopping at Scrimp 'n' Save, loading jumbo economy packs into a secondhand saloon? He could imagine Charlotte's disgust. He might as well go down to the car park, attach a pipe to the company car's exhaust, and lay out his body to die in a brand-new Ford Mondeo. Then at least the family'd get his life insurance, he'd be good for something.

But of course, they wouldn't—a suicide would make the policy void—he'd have to drive home as normal. He'd have to present Charlotte with the burden that was himself: He could see her sighing, giving up on him, launching into the development of her dried-flower sideline as a full-scale business. Could he bear to live off her dried flowers, his life hollow as an empty vase? He had a sudden vision of throttling Miles with his own silk tie, throwing the body down the garbage chute, pretending this conversation had never happened, carrying on as before. But there'd always be another Miles to take his place, clone upon clone, all of them programmed to pronounce the death sentence on Hanson Gray. No, he was the one who'd have to die. He could rig up an accident. A car crash? He shuddered—too frightening—and he'd run the risk of hurting someone else.

As he left Miles's office, grey-tinged, he shrank from facing his colleagues' condolences. He loosened his tie, suddenly claustrophobic in the building that had been his security, his bolt-hole from the family—Charlotte's voice could grate, and the boys were wearing. Now he couldn't seal himself off anymore.

He wandered out into Manchester's summer-stifled streets, clutching his briefcase to his chest like a comfort-bear, his chin

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contorted. He wondered why his face was wet and was astonished to realise he was crying. He hadn't known he was capable of tears. What would people think? They passed him, uncaring—what did it matter anymore what they thought? He could cry, laugh, dance in the road like a drunken beggar, stripping his clothes off piece by piece. Hanson Gray didn't exist anymore, he was nothing, no one who mattered.

When the tears cleared he found himself sitting on a kerb at the scruffier end of Deansgate, and through the crowd's bustle he was staring at a travel agency. Outside the shop was a board, and on the board was "Today—Express coach to Blackpool." The resort was the antithesis of all the Grays' aspirations—cheap, brash, vulgar—the sort of place Charlotte would only be bribed to visit, and then wearing a surgical mask. But he'd been there on a conference and felt curiously liberated by it—no longer feeling judged, no one's eyes poring critically over his wardrobe, no one estimating his worth by address or occupation, glancing in dismissal or welcome to the coterie.

Blackpool suddenly seemed to him a desirable place to be.

"I'm terribly sorry, darling," he said in the phone booth, "something's come up at work, I've got to zip off across country for a meeting—bit of crisis I'm afraid—I'll be staying there overnight . . . maybe longer. I'll keep in touch."

"But Hanson," replied his wife resentfully, not even concerned where he was going, "you know I've invited the Morleys for drinks and a bite of supper, and I only did it for you—we need to keep in with Piers Morley, he'll get you a leg up on the shooting club committee."

A leg up on the shooting club committee—the words followed him from his other life, up the coach steps, getting fainter with every mile of the way to Blackpool. Charlotte was cultivating the country set, and had turned out to be a keen shot—game or clay pigeons depending on the season. Hanson felt more like a beater. There was no way he'd get a leg up, or even a toehold on the club committee now—old Hanson the accountant was dead, and Piers Morley wouldn't want to retrieve his remains.

The coach disgorged its passengers on the tarmac and a salty sea breeze blew up Hanson's nose, drawing him down the street and across the main seafront road to the promenade. It was midafternoon, a July day, warm, humid, plenty of trippers lounging on the beach who'd never had need of an accountant and never would. They

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hardly noticed him—he mattered nothing to them. He tramped over the sand in his black leather lace-ups, still carrying his briefcase, full of redundant matter, a report he'd never give, a memo he'd never read, but he couldn't let go of it yet. Maybe, he thought miserably as he trudged steadily toward the sea, maybe he'd find the strength to throw it in and then strip off his Austin Reed suit, his Gieves and Hawkes shirt, his Tissot watch, and follow it knee-deep, waist-high, up to his armpits, over his head, and on into oblivion.

Passing the bucket and beachball brigade, however, he realised he'd need props—it had to look like a swimming accident. A child splashed among the waves on a Li-lo, giving him an idea—people were wafted out to sea on airbeds every year, weren't they? And their bodies were always washed up, in time.

Back across the promenade he blundered, toward the shops. A side street beckoned, stalls lining it like a souk, crammed with sexually explicit T-shirts, cartoon-imprinted towels, bad-taste postcards, and joke tankards displaying indecent monks or the Mannequin Pis. Hanson perused these like a visitor from another planet, and indeed was viewed as such by the stall holders—or at least by those who didn't suspect he was an inspector of some sort, narrowing their eyes and holding back from serving him.

He stopped by a clutch of blown-up airbeds, corseted together with string: a giant banana, inflated dentures, a swollen lobster, a drooping crocodile.

"You've nothing, ummm, plainer?" asked Hanson of the assistant plaintively.

"Sorry love, Blackpool doesn't come plainer than this," replied the copper-haired, bum-bagged, pumpkin-bosomed stall holder, who'd decided to meet the enemy full-on. "Go on, take the false teeth, they'll give your missis a laugh—that's what people come here for."

She jogged his elbow as she wobbled the rubbery jaws together, urging him to laugh with her. "Ho-ho-ho," he managed to come up with, not very convincingly.

"Here," said Mrs. Pumpkin, freeing the pink and white monster, "you have this on me, love, take it for your kids." (Meaning, take it and go away, leave me and my turnover out of whatever you've come to check.)

"Kids?" he ventured tentatively—he was strangely touched that she should take such a personal interest in him. "How—how did you know I had—?"

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"Well-set-up feller like you, love, bound to have a family, aren't you?—wouldn't seem right if you didn't."

"No . . . I . . . suppose . . . " It hadn't seemed right, that's why he'd buckled down, got married, had two children, no more, the societal norm. It was what was expected. . . . Vaguely, as of a childhood dream, he remembered yearning to do good works in a hot climate, living simply, bartering his help for a frugal sustenance, smiles his reward—Voluntary Service Overseas, or famine relief, yes, something like that. Father snorted, Mother scorned, Charlotte had kissed him at the May Ball, and so the dream had crumpled.

"You all right, love? Still with us, eh?" the stall holder asked, puzzled at his reverie. Five minutes later, and slightly relieved, she watched him go away, briefcase still in hand, now containing one deflated denture-airbed, one pair of electric-blue baggy nylon swimming shorts, and a plastic snorkel. Why hadn't he bought a towel too, she pondered briefly before swivelling back to serve someone wanting an invisible canary-on-a-leash that twittered like Tweetie-Pie.

Of course, Hanson didn't need a towel, he'd be dried off in the morgue. At least he'd now look the part. The heat was becoming oppressive, he was even beginning to look forward to his final dip. He would lay down his briefcase, doff his constricting suit, don the shorts under cover of his jacket, and wade in, dragging his dentures, heading for release. Impatiently he waited to cross the road to the promenade, wanting to get down on the beach and get it over with.

"Give us fifty p for a cuppa tea?"

His trouser leg was being tugged. He looked down to see a girl seated on the pavement, her hair looking as if it had been extruded from his paper shredder. She wore a cavernous jumper the colour of puddles, black leggings that bagged at the knees, riding up her scrawny calves, and mouldy boots. She looked about sixteen, the same age as his elder son, and she smelt musky.

"I only want a cuppa tea." She repeated the last two words like a mantra. "I haven't eaten for two days."

A beggar, hmm? He was used to these in Manchester—they'd fester in abandoned doorways, sucking on brown plastic bottles and putting out a grimy palm when their Strongbow ran out.

"I give to charities for the homeless, not to individuals," was his standard reply, and it was true, he could justify it if asked, but the girl was not asking.

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"Screw you then, squire," she muttered, sizing up his bulging briefcase.

Feeling uncomfortable, he dodged the traffic to cross the road, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the puddle-coloured jumper coming after him like a reproach. He wanted to get away as quickly as possible, convinced the musky smell was growing stronger: She must be gaining on him, why hadn't he given her the wretched 50p? Oh lord, her eyes—even the whites looked dirty—bored through his suit, not scanning for labels, like Charlotte's set, but X-raying for his wallet. He wouldn't be intimidated, he had to get away. He shot across the tram tracks that ribboned the seafront, unheeding of a thunderous old tram festooned in lightbulbs, bearing down on him. He looked up straight into its headlamps, the driver's eyes above them wide with horror, trying to slam on the brakes, and the terror froze him solid. In the two seconds it took for the tram to reach him, it flashed through his mind that this was the very accident he'd been looking for—quick, plausible, unexpected, far more dignified than being swept out to sea on a pair of giant dentures. Yes, he prepared to accept his fate, overcome with a sense of relief.

Blackness descended, he felt himself bowled over, steeled himself for the crush of metal on bone. It never came. He opened his eyes, found himself rolling on concrete at the side of the track. His briefcase had burst open as he hit the ground, but it had been deftly scooped up and was gone.

"She saved him," a woman was shouting. "Stop that girl, she saved his life, don't let her get away."

People asked him if he was all right. With a kind of despair, he said yes, then looked up dazedly to see the girl being brought back between two hairy-chested men in shorts and very little else.

"Give it 'im back, lassie," said one of them to her in a Scots accent. "Give it 'im back and we'll say no more about it. You did push 'im out the way of the tram, he wouldna be here if you hadn't. P'raps he'll show his appreciation."

And so she knelt down and produced his briefcase from under her blankety sweater, presenting it to Hanson sulkily.

"Take it," he said, too crushed to care. "It's no use to me anymore."

"No use to me, either," she retorted. "Nothing sellable in it; I need money, not rubbish." The contents—blow-up dentures, snorkel, and all—displayed for her disparagement, suddenly intrigued her. "You some kinda nut case?"

"What if I am?"

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"Welcome to the club."

Hanson realised his briefcase had revealed him as a nonconformist, like her. "Did I really save your life?" she asked.

"Yes, and I didn't want that, either."

"You've a nerve," she responded, with real feeling, a flicker of amusement in her eyes. He warmed to those eyes, black-ringed though they were—all his family's were an icy grey, hers a rich brown which probably matched her hair when it was washed.

People shuffled round the pair, finding them entertaining, wondering what they'd do next.

"What's your name?" asked Hanson.

"Mandy." A child's name, a name someone must have cooed over her cot in the days when she was bathed and fed. It fitted ill on a grungy runaway like her.

"Come on then, Mandy. Let's get away from these spectators. I'll buy you a cup of tea."

"And the rest. Roast chicken and baked potatoes with butter, and ice cream. Fair swap for a life."

"Whatever you like."

Mandy attached herself to Hanson like a stray cat.

Numbed by all that had happened, he put off setting up any more accidents and booked himself into a poky bed-sit that was billed as a holiday flatlet. Mandy would appear at the steps every morning to be fed. He'd take her for bacon and eggs or chips as she wished, and then she'd disappear again to her feral life. She'd prickle when he inquired what she did; an air of chemical substances hung around her, he couldn't leave her to fend for herself, for she might not, and in a curious way he realised she was keeping him alive, for he wanted her to live.

She began to linger over her daily meal, as though she wanted to stay longer in his company. Her eyes grew brighter, and one hot day he tempted her into his room with the promise of ice-cold Coke. He'd been using the blow-up dentures as an armchair for reading, enthroned on the bed, and she giggled for the first time, her smile his reward, and then she kissed him. He glowed, realising that he loved her.

He'd told no one his real name. He'd grown a beard and sold his suit and travelled to a far-off town to empty his bank account. Finally he cut up all the debit, credit, and cash cards in the name of Hanson Gray, tore up his personal documents, and took Mandy down on the beach to make a bonfire of his old self.

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"What name shall I use now?" asked Hanson, encircling her with his arms as they watched the embers die. "I'll need to get a job soon."

"Nigel Nutcase," replied Mandy derisively. "Or David Do-Good."

Hanson smiled—he had at least done good works in a hot climate—he filled up with gladness, wanting to pour it out like champagne to give her: She'd scoff if he told her, but this felt better than anything he'd ever known. Later that evening she pulled him toward the Pleasure Beach fun fair, begging him to mount a carousel of galloping horses. As he twirled round and round, Mandy behind him on the saddle, clutching his waist, he realised at last what this wondrous feeling was: peace—nothing to strive for, nothing to prove—how many years he had wasted struggling to be Hanson Gray.

Barely twenty feet away, at the rifle range, two middle-aged women took aim at the targets, piling up points to win fluffy toys from a selection that surrounded a large mirror at the back of the stall. One woman was a private detective, the other her client, and both were accomplished markswomen, to the stall holder's chagrin.

"I'm sorry it's turned out this way," said the detective, accepting a second stuffed bear.

"Not as sorry as I am," replied Charlotte, overcome with loathing for this onion-and-candy-smelling fun fair with its common shrieks and garish blare. Before anyone could stop her, she swung her air-rifle toward the carousel. She hadn't meant to do this, she'd only meant to give him a good dressing down, claim her wifely desserts, but that expression of joy on his face as she watched him in the mirror hit her like a bullet. In the next second she pulled the trigger, and Hanson's world exploded—he believed it was with happiness. The pellet's shock sent him soaring away from the horse's back, still in Mandy's arms. He crashed skull-down on the carousel floor, and was no more.

So that was how it really felt to be shot, right between the eyes. Charlotte's vision cleared. Her life was over.

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In March of 1994, Hayford Peirce introduced EQMM *readers to one of the most memorable of police detectives, the fabulously overweight Tahitian chief of police, Alexandre Tama. Tama is back this issue, but only in a cameo appearance, for Mr. Peirce has changed his focus here to an entirely new creature of his imagination, a displaced American P.I. who has retired from the French Foreign Legion and makes his home in Tahiti. As before, Mr. Peirce fascinates with his eye for the bizarre in Tahitian society . . .*

FIRE IN THE ISLANDS

by HAYFORD PEIRCE

I'd gone home for lunch and found the small wooden house I rented from Amelie and Opatia Raparii a smoldering ruin, along with everything I owned in the way of personal possessions. I tried to tell myself that except for the few pieces of light clothing that was all I needed here in the damp, sticky heat of Tahiti, there wasn't really all that much to lose, mostly useless odds and ends from the various exotic countries I'd been stationed in during the course of twenty-three years in the French Foreign Legion. Who needed a bunch of tourist-trap curios that I no longer even noticed?

But now that they were unexpectedly and irretrievably destroyed, they seemed to assume a vast significance they'd never had before. Somehow they now represented my entire life since I'd left the bucolic charms of Bookbinder, Kansas, for the worldly attractions of Olde Europe. . . .

I tried to catalog exactly what had been lost in the flames, but even as I strained to remember, their images were becoming as elusive as the memory of last night's dreams. I stared at the still-glowing embers a few minutes longer, then, feeling curiously empty, bid a silent farewell to all those years of my life and walked slowly away.

And now the woman who'd set fire to my house was sitting on the other side of the desk in my small office across from the cathedral

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in downtown Papeete, insisting that she wanted to hire me.

Even for Tahitians, who are justly storied for their blithe insouciance, I thought this was a noteworthy example of chutzpah. My immediate impulse upon seeing Amelie Raparii slyly poke her sallow, ivory-colored face through the half-opened door had been to punch her smartly on the end of her hawklike nose. My second inclination was to throw her out the window to the sidewalk two flights below, where she'd land just below the small sign with neat gold-leaf characters that I'd epoxied to the wall a few months before, the one that reads:

AGENCE CANEILI
INVESTIGATIONS, SÉCURITÉ
DISCRÉTION ASSURÉE

But sergeant-majors of the Foreign Legion are, of course, widely celebrated for their iron self-control, even those retired ones living in Tahiti on the pension disbursed by a grateful French government.

I suppose I ought to say, *particularly* those retired sergeant-majors living off their pension—along with whatever nickels and dimes the detecting business in Polynesia might bring in. For to cap my day I'd just now remembered that last month's pension check had been carefully left at home—tucked away in a shirt pocket that was now nothing but ashes. Eventually, I supposed, I might succeed in getting a new one issued; in the meantime, there was nothing to tide me over to next month's dole but whatever business I could fiddle up in the way of investigations, security, or discretion.

So, to paraphrase that lady from Oakland, under these circumstances a client is a client is a client. . . .

I sighed, and tried to keep from jumping over the desk and grabbing my new client's scrawny neck between my two sun-freckled hands and shaking her until her eyes popped.

"All investigations by the Agence Caneili are payable strictly in cash," I informed her between my teeth, though French is difficult enough to start with without making it almost impossible by not moving your lips. Madame Raparii nodded somberly. "In advance," I added, tapping my finger on the desk to emphasize every poignant syllable.

"How much?" she demanded.

"How much is it worth staying out of jail?"

Her eyes widened reproachfully and she put a knuckle to her lips and began to gnaw it thoughtfully. While I watched I wondered idly

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why, in fact, now that I'd mentioned it, she *wasn't* in jail. Could she be the daughter of the senator? The secret lover of Alexandre Tama, the fattest man in a country of notably stout trenchermen and the *commissaire* of police?

"Fifty thousand," she murmured hopefully, interrupting my speculations.

I snorted. "The only clothes I have to my name are those you see on my back. And as you may know, I no longer have a house to live in—I'll have to move into a hotel. How long do you imagine fifty thousand francs will last?" At today's exchange rate, 50,000 francs was about $485, and in a country as expensive as Tahiti that would last about the time it took me to stroll from my office to the nearest *bourbonnerie* for a large glass of something cold and bracing.

"One hundred thousand," she said firmly. "That's all I can afford." She batted her eyelashes at me in sweet reason. "After all, don't forget: *My* house burned down too."

I sighed again. This was what made the whole business so peculiarly infuriating. If she'd torched my house because I'd been behind in my rent, say, I might have almost understood her motives. But it hadn't been her tenant's modest house she'd intended to burn down, but her *own*. It was only her innate pyromaniacal skill, coupled with the fact that only a few yards separated the two houses, that had enabled her to burn down two for the price of one.

"One hundred thousand isn't much better," I said without any attempt at my usual graciousness of manner, "but I suppose it will have to do."

She wrote out a check on the Westpac Bank, whose main office I could see through my window just on the other side of the solid old cathedral. I scrutinized the check carefully for signature and date, then stuck it into the pocket of my one remaining shirt, vowing that if *this* check got burned up before I could get it across the street and into the sanctuary of the bank, it was going to take a battalion of kamikaze commandos with oversized flamethrowers to do the job.

Now that I'd been paid, I leaned back in my wooden chair and closed my eyes the way I used to read about Nero Wolfe doing. "So you want me to find your husband," I muttered. "Tell me, Madame Raparii, and I mention this only out of the merest curiosity, it has nothing at all to do with the job in hand. Just *why* did you burn down your own house?"

Her sallow complexion reddened suddenly. She sketched a small gesture with her right hand. "It was all my husband's fault," she

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said with utter righteousness. "He made me mad at him, so I burned down the house."

"Ah." That was logical enough by Tahitian standards, even though I knew very well that she lived there too. "It was *his* house, then?"

"Oh no, it's in both our names."

"I see," I managed after a long pause. "Because you were mad at him. And just why do you want me to find him now?"

"To tell him I'm not mad at him anymore."

As she said, it was all her husband's fault.

Three months before, he had taken a 1,000-franc note from his pocket and exchanged it for a Fei-Pi tombola ticket sold by a nine-year-old boy in front of the Pirae post office. Fei-Pi is a kind of Tahitian banana, as well as the name of a well-known sports club in Tahiti. Not content with just their soccer field and basketball court and downtown office building, now the club wanted to build a large tennis facility up in the green hills behind town. Since Fei-Pi was a semi-public, reasonably benevolent organization, the local government authorized them to organize a lottery and to sell tickets in order to raise funds for their seven tennis courts. A portion of the money raised would go to the government, a larger portion to the *Association Sportive de Fei-Pi,* and whatever was left over to the holders of the winning tickets.

In this particular tombola, third prize was 2.5 million French Pacific francs, or something in the neighborhood of $24,250. As I mentioned before, Tahiti is almost outrageously expensive. But on the other hand, there's no income tax. So $24,000 represents a fairly tidy sum of money, especially for a hard-working, middle-aged Tahitian couple. Opatia, the husband, worked at one of the big tourist hotels, I knew, and his wife Amelie drove one of those homemade open-air jitney buses that in Tahiti are called *le truck,* I suppose because to obtain one you simply buy a truck chassis and build a big wooden passenger compartment out over the back. Or possibly because once you have it, you stuff it full of passengers, pigs, chickens, watermelons, bags of cement, and rolled-up mattresses just as if you were throwing them all into an unsprung dump truck. . . .

Opatia was a man not without faults, said Amelie darkly, but to give him his due, neither did he smoke, drink, or gamble, or at least not outlandishly so. In this particular case, his virtues must have outweighed his faults, for to his delighted astonishment the single

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tombola ticket he had nearly forgotten about now proved to be the winner of Fei-Pi's 2.5 million-franc third prize.

His wife, Madame Raparii, was equally delighted at the news, or at least until she discovered what he planned to do with this sudden windfall of great wealth.

"So what *did* he do with it?" I asked curiously, no longer lounging back with my eyes closed. I knew what *I* would have done with it if I'd been married to this wretched woman: grabbed the first plane bound for Reno.

"That's what started to make me mad in the first place," she explained. "He just wouldn't tell me. At first I thought he'd give me half, just as you're supposed to do when you're married, but he wouldn't do that, and then he wouldn't tell me how he was going to spend it. All he said was how nice I'd look with some nice gold jewelry."

I could have told Opatia that he was completely wrong about *that,* but perhaps the one thing I've learned in forty-some years on five continents and a dozen islands is that love really is blind. I charitably supposed that Opatia Raparii was merely blinder than most.

"So then when I thought he was going to buy me some beautiful gold jewelry I wasn't mad at him any longer," the addled arsonist went on. "But two or three days went by, and then a week, and nothing happened, and he still wouldn't say anything and I began to—"

"—get mad again," I interrupted.

"Yes. So I asked him where the money was. And you know what he said? He said it was gone! He said it had all been stolen!"

My opinion of Opatia began to rise. "Did you believe that?" I asked, already knowing the answer. She withered me with a look, as if she was beginning to wonder if she'd come to the right detective. "All right, you didn't believe him. *Then* what happened?"

What happened was that she chased her husband out of the house and into the banana trees that grew out back, yelling and screaming all the while. While all this was going on, their tenant and next-door neighbor was immobilized in town in the clutch of the end-of-the-afternoon traffic jam, so I'd missed seeing the fun. As Thursday evening wore on and became Friday, Opatia still didn't return home, but his aggrieved wife was in no mood to care.

By Saturday morning, her mood hadn't improved any as she shuttled her bus back and forth between Point Venus and the downtown market, picking up and discharging passengers and, I supposed,

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causing a dozen near-accidents in the manner of all Tahitian *truck* drivers. One of the passengers grew tired of the reggae music blasting over the stereo speakers in the passenger section and climbed up front for a good gossip with the driver. And so Madame Raparii learned how her husband had been seen talking in intimate fashion with a good-looking *popa'a* woman near the marketplace in town several days before. "She had long blond hair and her hand on Opatia's arm," cawed the old biddy. "You know what those white women are like."

Amelie Raparii surely did know what those white women were like, so after depositing her load of passengers in front of the market she drove her bus home at breakneck speed, ready to claw Opatia's eyes from his face. For now she *knew* where the 2,500,000 had gone! Her shameless husband had spent it all on some *popa'a* slut! No wonder he had tried to tell her it had been stolen!

But Opatia was still not at home. Nor was the Rapariis' *popa'a* tenant, who had chosen that particular fateful Saturday morning to see if he couldn't sell the notion of an all-encompassing security service to the manager of the Hotel Royal Tahitian. Just about the time that Knucklehead Caneili was painting a vivid word-picture of the ease with which the hotel's beautiful pandanus-roofed restaurant could go up in a cloud of smoke, Madame Raparii's wrath had at last bubbled over and she was stalking tight-lipped into the garage for the twenty-liter jerrycan of gasoline.

"And now you want me to find your husband so you can tell him you're sorry."

She nodded bashfully. "After—after the house caught on fire I met *another* friend. She said that the *popa'a* woman Opatia was talking to was only the wife of the manager of the Hotel Tahara'a. That's where he works, you know. He's the head gardener," she added proudly. "So it's really all the fault of that woman who was telling me lies about him."

"I see." I stared up at the stained concrete ceiling. A better guess was that she wanted me to find her husband before the local cops did, so she could try to keep him from having her arrested for willful arson. Although from what I knew of the French legal system it seemed to me that the *procureur* would be filing charges against her whether or not her husband laid a complaint. And it suddenly occurred to me that the *real* reason Amelie Raparii wasn't sitting in jail at this very moment was that the police simply hadn't caught up with her yet.

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Well, I didn't want them finding her in the company of that well-known upholder of the laws of the land, Joseph (*dit* "Joe") Caneili, so I rose to my feet and ushered her out as quickly as I could. She seemed reluctant to leave, and who could blame her? Even on a Saturday afternoon, the various police forces and gendarmes who accounted for the law and order of French Polynesia might bestir themselves enough to look for her, although not, I imagined, in any very purposeful way.

But on an island as small as Tahiti, sooner or later they were bound to find her, if only by accident. And the French have very primitive notions about bail. The general theory seems to be that if they take the trouble to put you in jail in the first place, that's where they want you to stay until it's time for the trial. Probably it's easier on the paperwork. So it was almost possible to halfway sympathize with her plight as she stood there in my ill-lighted hallway, hardly daring to turn toward the stairwell.

I sneered at myself for my mushy heart. Wasn't this the woman who had wantonly burned down my house? And didn't I have her 100,000 francs safely tucked away? What did I care if she was thrown in the Bastille and left there to rot until the wheels of French justice got around to disposing of her case sometime in the middle of the next century?

Finally she muttered she was going off to stay with her half-sister in the district of Mataiea on the other side of the island, and I watched her go slowly down the stairs and out of sight.

I tried to work up a good scowl, but couldn't seem to do it with any great conviction. From the little I'd seen of Opatia since renting their house four months ago, Amelie's wayward husband seemed like a merry enough fellow and a reasonably good landlord, and his own house, after all, had been burned down just as thoroughly as mine. In fact, since he owned my house too, I supposed you could say he was even *worse* off than I was. So it would probably be only neighborly to let him know where his wife could be found if he were ever crazy enough to want to return to her loving embrace.

I sighed at my own folly. If I were in the mood, I told myself, later on I might turn the bright spotlight of my attention for a moment or so onto the Problem of the Missing Husband. But right now I felt certain I could hear the soft sounds of Perrier bubbles sparkling in a tall glass of scotch and ice down in the sidewalk cafe a block away on the waterfront. Somehow, I knew, they were calling me.

* * *

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A full-grown Tahitian centipede, if you're lucky enough to have avoided meeting one up to now, is about eight inches long and a glossy brown in color, like a highly polished army boot. Its chitinous body is about half an inch across and is divided into neat armored segments. In spite of its name it doesn't really have a hundred feet—I'd say it has to make do with a measly two dozen or so—but it does have these two big mandibles, or teeth, or claws, or whatever a bugologist would call them, at the business end of its body. These can give you as painful a jolt as you've ever known. None of the bombs and bullets I'd dodged in the Legion had ever made such an impression on me as the time I'd been left hobbling and screaming by the bite of a centipede. I'd been terrified of them ever since.

Now I was looking down at a full-sized one poised motionlessly on the thin khaki-colored cotton shorts just above my left knee. Even if you've never been bitten by one, just looking at them will make the hairs rise on the back of your neck and your tongue recoil in your mouth. They're as evil-looking a thing as you can imagine.

For a long, *long* moment I stared aghast, too paralyzed to breathe. The brown-skinned Tahitian sitting next to me seemed equally appalled as he gaped in dull astonishment at the horrid beastie. Neither of us spoke or tried to move from the low wooden bench where we sat drinking lukewarm beer outside a tumbledown shack deep in a damp, lush valley of Moorea. My search for Opatia Raparii had brought me here fifteen minutes earlier, at the end of a thoroughly uneventful day, but now it seemed as if a malevolent Nature was about to make my little outing to Moorea an especially memorable one.

As I waited for the excruciating pain that was about to smite me, I roundly cursed the day I had ever decided to move into the cute little house Amelie and Opatia Raparii were kind enough to rent me.

But Caneili's battered old body has a mind of its own when it comes to dealing with rampaging centipedes. Without the benefit of any further introspection I suddenly found myself high in the air, apparently heading for orbit, while I saw the centipede sail a dozen yards through the air, smacked by a left-handed backhand I'm sure John McEnroe would admire.

When I eventually reentered the atmosphere and made a two-point landing, I found Opatia eyeing me with a strange solemnity, his mouth working and his cheeks bulging, as if he were trying to hold back a mighty sneeze. My own body was trembling from the

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enormous jolt of adrenaline that had propelled me into outer space, and I walked shakily over to where the centipede lay twisted on its back, its innumerable feet raised stiffly in the air.

"Eeeeyaaa . . ." exclaimed Opatia wonderingly as he came to join me. He nudged the dead beast cautiously with the side of his enormous bare foot. A moment later I gaped in astonishment as he reached down to pick up the centipede and nonchalantly tuck it away in his shirt pocket. He grinned at me sheepishly, and a terrible suspicion began to form in my mind.

Even as a kid in Bookbinder, Kansas, I never liked practical jokes. To begin with, I could never understand what the word *practical* had to do with it. *Practical,* I'd been taught in school, was another way of saying *useful,* and I was unable to see what was useful about overturning old Farmer Lofton in his outhouse on a frosty winter's morning. A *practical* result of that, I knew, was a solid thrashing with a stout leather belt. All in all, I must have been a pretty stodgy kid.

You'd suppose that twenty-three years in the bosom of the Foreign Legion as the consequence of a small contretemps near Cologne, Germany, might have scoured away the last traces of stodginess, but evidently it hadn't.

I *still* didn't like practical jokes.

Or jokers. I stared grimly at Opatia Raparii, the erstwhile Missing Husband. He returned my stony gaze with total innocence, almost as if he hadn't been the one to slyly place a dead centipede on my knee while my attention was elsewhere—admiring Caneili, I supposed, for the ease and grace with which he'd traced his quarry to this obscure corner of Moorea.

In all honesty, though, it hadn't taken any great cunning on the part of the Old Scout. After my gracious wave of farewell to my newfound client yesterday afternoon, I'd spent the rest of the day attending to those personal chores that tend to arise when your house and possessions have just gone up in flames. An old *camarade* from the Legion had sheltered me for the night, and, after sharing an early Sunday morning breakfast with him of greasy deep-fried crullers and thin slices of barbecued pork from the neighborhood Chinese grocery store, Duty had reluctantly sounded the trumpet.

Opatia was the head gardener at the Hotel Tahara'a, I knew, so I cranked up my bright red Deux Chevaux, that curious French car that looks as if it had been put together in somebody's backyard from leftover pieces of corrugated tin, then pedaled it out through

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the district of Arue and up the steep road of the Tahara'a promontory.

Up at the top, on what used to be called One Tree Hill, and maybe still is, although there are now a lot more trees on it than the single one Captain Cook originally found growing there, the Hotel Tahara'a sprawled over the far end of the promontory. Seven or eight stories of rooms had been built like giant steps going down the cliffs that fell off to the sea, while the lobby and enormous restaurant in the shape of a stylized Samoan long-house sat on top at ground level. It was the only hotel I'd ever heard of in which you had to take an elevator *down* to your room, but then I'm the first to admit that ex-legionnaires are not necessarily the most qualified experts on the luxury hotels of the world. The only thing I could afford at the Tahara'a was an occasional late-afternoon drink on its terrace overlooking the wide blue Pacific. Even without a drink, it was worth going there just to watch the sun slide down behind the jagged volcanic peaks of the island of Moorea that hung against the horizon a dozen miles to the west like the backbone of some fantastic dinosaur.

This particular Sunday morning I was lucky enough to run across the director of hotel maintenance, a large, perpetually sunburnt redhead from Longview, Texas, who had pulled himself from bed to come look at a leaky boiler. While I passed him wrenches and we commiserated about the rigors of the Tahitian working day, he tried to devote a moment's thought to his colleague Opatia Raparii, my errant gardener. But after nearly scalding ourselves to death with a sudden burst of super-heated steam, we retreated in some disorder to the terrace bar for a cooling glass or two of Hinano, one of the grossly overrated local beers.

"Opatia," he said as he wiped the foam from his lips. "Last I heard, he was supposed to be doin' couple days' work for Mrs. Steuben, over at their place."

I nodded. Sandy Steuben was part-owner of the Tahara'a and the managing partner. He and his wife lived in their own sprawling house on a choice site at the far edge of the hotel grounds, totally hidden from view of the riffraff by a dense cluster of trees on the other side of the pitch-and-putt golf course. I'd met Steuben when I'd tried to sell the hotel a security package, but never his wife.

After stopping off at the reception desk to phone ahead, I strolled across the lush green carpet of the golf course, over a small wooden footbridge, and down a path through a hundred yards or so of shade

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trees and underbrush. Every so often I had to stop to dab at the sweat that rolled down my face like a waterfall from the broad-brimmed plantation hat I wore as a disguise on my excursions into the world beyond my office.

At my approach three dogs of startlingly mixed ancestry set up an enormous racket and the Steubens came out of their house to stop the commotion. We sat by their pool with its panoramic view of Point Venus and the lighthouse to one side and of the great looming mountains of the interior to the other. Mrs. Steuben was a handsome blond woman of about my age, and I could see why Amelie Raparii had received such a glowing word-picture of her lush charms. I wondered idly if what my client considered the torrid nature of *popa'a* women was actually true. They never seemed to act that way with *me*.

"Opatia?" said Mrs. Steuben. "See all that mess over there? Someday it's supposed to be a pool house and covered barbecue, and it's going to be made out of bamboo. I wanted him to plant a thicket of bamboo around the back and sides, but he hasn't started yet, since none of the nurseries seem to have any of the right kind available at the moment. I ran across him at the marketplace the other day, and he said something about ordering some from Moorea."

"Ordering!" snorted Sandy Steuben. "Whattaya mean, ordering? That's where he's *going!* He's got some uncle who lives up one of the valleys who can get us all the bamboo we need." He set down his frosty glass of ice water. "Including that big stuff you use for building. For *free!* He says there's a whole valley of it up there, just growing wild." He winked at me. "It must belong to *somebody,* but I guess as long as it's just a couple of Tahitians cutting it down and carrying it out on their backs no one seems to care. So I told him to go on over and give his cousin a couple bottles of Johnny Walker Red and bring us back a *boatload* of the stuff." He waved a meaty hand. "Hell, the hotel can use a *dozen* boatloads. Especially if it's free."

So now I knew why it was called Free Enterprise—I had it straight from a guy who'd made a couple of million bucks at it. No wonder it was supposed to be a good thing—at least for the people who were getting it free. I thanked the Steubens and wandered slowly back to my Deux Chevaux in the hotel parking lot. Amelie Raparii said she hadn't seen Opatia since Thursday afternoon when she'd chased him out of the house and into the banana trees. And Sandy Steuben

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said that since he hadn't shown up for work on Friday, he had assumed that Opatia had gone to Moorea for the bamboo.

Even the old hound Inspector Lestrade could have followed the trail. Or so I told myself on the way to the airport. Suppose Opatia really *did* have a mistress, maybe even a *popa'a* blonde, tucked away in a love-nest somewhere in town and had decided to spend the weekend with her? I'd look pretty foolish trying to find him in the midst of a bamboo forest somewhere in Moorea.

But nothing ventured, nothing strained. At the international airport in Faaa I left my steed at the small terminal that served the shuttle flights over to Moorea and twenty minutes later was sitting beside the pilot of a twin-engined Otter as we zoomed 1,800 feet above the tiny whitecaps.

In Moorea I rented a car even more dilapidated than my own and set out in search of a bamboo forest. When you leave the airport, most of the island's hotels and people are off to the right. So I turned to the left and began to slowly make my way around the island. To one side of me were placid lagoons with an occasional fisherman's pirogue or Sunday-afternoon speedboat on the clear blue waters. Inland were coconut plantations and lush green hills nestled against the great perpendicular walls of bare volcanic rock that soared up thousands of feet to disappear into the ominous grey rain clouds that hung over the island's interior.

I stopped at the mayor's office for information but it was closed, and then at every Chinese store I came to, but they were closed too, so finally, out of desperation, I began to question random Tahitians who sat by the roadside strumming their guitars or just gossiping and watching the girls stroll by.

Three hours passed, then four. I had been all the way around the island and was now halfway past the airport again. No one had ever heard of a bamboo forest. At last I woke up and remembered where I was. If the first question in Tahiti elicits nothing but a dull bovine stare, you change the perspective a little and ask it again.

Did they know anyone who *worked* in a bamboo forest? Who could *get* you bamboo?

Sure, came the immediate answer. *Everyone* knew Freddie Mauati, a reclusive old guy who lived up the valley where all the bamboo was.

I got directions on how to find the valley where all the bamboo was and set off again. Tahitians!

* * *

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By the time I'd driven up a twisting dirt road that was more of a footpath than a road and then abandoned the car for a half-hour hike through a narrowing valley filled with mango and ironwood trees, it was getting on for late afternoon. My clothes were so soaked by the sweat that rolled down my body that I'd given up trying to wipe it away. I vowed I'd have to take the rattletrap air conditioner out of my office and try to work myself back into shape. To be in this kind of condition after a short stroll in the great outdoors—humiliating!

When I finally got to Freddie Mauati's, I don't know whether the warm beer I was offered helped the situation or not. It certainly didn't quench my thirst, and if anything it only made me sweat faster. But who can turn down a beer of any kind when they're hot? Or even a second? Not Caneili.

Even now, the reclusive Freddie Mauati lived up to his billing. When I'd come out of the forest into a small clearing almost at the base of a looming volcanic wall there was no one at home by his small thatched shack except a couple of dozen chickens, an equal number of dogs and cats, and his wayward nephew and my erstwhile landlord, Opatia Raparii. He was dressed for the occasion in a limp green bathing suit, a U.S. Army camouflage jacket, and a moldy grey Philadelphia Athletics baseball cap that must have been forty years old. He seemed surprised to see me, as who wouldn't be in that neck of the woods, but politely offered me a quart of his uncle's warm beer. There were nine cases of the stuff stacked up outside the house and I wondered how he'd carried it all up here.

"He's built like a horse," explained Opatia as I gulped another beer to ward off possible shock caused by my encounter with the centipede. "No: six horses. That's what you get like if you spend forty years carrying five-hundred-pound loads of bamboo from here down to the road."

"Where is he now? I don't want someone built like six horses getting mad at me for drinking his beer."

Opatia gestured at the dark gloom that was beginning to envelop the forest around us. "Up there where the bamboo grows, getting some more. He'll do anything for a bottle of whiskey." I noticed an enormous stack of neatly trimmed bamboo at the side of the clearing. Each piece of freshly cut green wood was at least four inches across and twenty feet long. It made my back ache just to look at it. "Tomorrow he'll carry it down to the road and load it on the boat."

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"While you carry the Johnny Walker Red?"

Opatia grinned cheerfully. "Someone has to."

"I see. So you'll be going back to town tomorrow." I scratched the end of my chin. It was hard to feel much sympathy for a man who would put a dead centipede on your knee. "I'm afraid you're going to find things at home a little . . . changed," I said with a certain relish.

As I unfolded my little story he gazed at me with much the same stunned horror as I must have gazed at the centipede perched on my leg. "You mean she burnt down my *house?"* he croaked. "*Both* our houses?"

"The second one might have been a mistake." I watched with interest as his light brown face first whitened, then darkened with rage. Ah, love! I wondered now how he felt his sweet wife would look covered with beautiful gold jewelry.

"But that's crazy!" he shouted, suddenly jumping to his feet and waving a sudsy bottle of beer in my face as if I personally had been the one passing the matches to his wife. "You're trying to say she *believed* me when I told her the money was stolen?"

I raised my eyebrows. "You didn't think she believed you while she was chasing you through the banana trees?"

For a long moment the bottle quivered in Opatia's hand as if he was going to smash it across my head. I got ready to jump again, for my life. But with a sudden hiss of anger he whirled and threw the bottle ineffectually against the soft bamboo plaits of his Uncle Freddie's house. A moment later he disappeared at high speed into the depths of the forest. "Hey, wait a second!" I protested indignantly. I hadn't come all the way to Moorea just to be left sitting here like *this!*

A faint voice reached my ears from the trees. "It was only a joke!" it seemed to be saying. "I told you, it was only a joke!"

"It was only a joke," I repeated to Amelie Raparii as we jolted along the potholed road that led to the ruins of her two houses. The yellow headlights of her homemade bus bounced ineffectually against the dark tangled mass of *bourau* trees that framed a forbidding tunnel all around us. It was only 7:30 P.M., but night falls early in Tahiti and the silvery moon was already high in the starry sky.

I'd returned from Moorea on the last flight of the day to discover that a person or persons unknown had perpetrated a misdemeanor, or maybe even a felony, upon my faithful Deux Chevaux as it sat

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in the airport parking lot. To wit, the battery was missing.

I blinked twice and tried to keep from screaming aloud. It was lucky for me that I was a detective: In the morning I would be able to track down the culprits responsible and extract a fearful retribution. But in the meantime I had to spend half a ransom on taxi fare back to town.

While I stood indecisively in front of the darkened cathedral wondering what to do next, a horn tooted twice and I looked up to find Amelie Raparii peering down at me from the cab of her bus. With nothing better to do, I climbed in beside her and told her about my day.

"You say he seems . . . angry?"

"I think you could say that."

She snorted angrily herself. "You see what kind of a man he is? Always playing what he calls his little jokes! And now he says the stolen money was just another little joke! I'll joke him!"

And before I could leap for my life she had thrown the bus into gear and was racing through the nearly deserted streets of Papeete.

I think she drove back to the blackened ruins of her house simply because there was no other place to go. As fate would have it, Opatia loomed up before us in the dim yellow beams standing knee-deep in the remains of what had once been his living room. The expression on his face as he squinted up into the high beams of *le truck* was not pleasant to see.

I sat tactfully in the bus as Amelie jumped down and ran through the charred timbers and twisted pieces of roofing to join her husband. I couldn't understand what they were yelling at each other in Tahitian but I certainly had no trouble hearing it. If I'd been back in Moorea in Freddie Mauati's valley I could have heard it.

When Amelie pushed Opatia angrily against the shoulder and he shoved her back even more forcefully, I decided it was time to get down from the cab and make my presence felt. I supposed that bodyguarding was part of the comprehensive security package a client was entitled to when she signed up with the Caneili Agency, and anyway it couldn't be good advertising to let a client get beaten up while Monsieur le Président Directeur-Général of the agency did nothing to stop it.

I took a dozen steps towards them, then stopped discreetly, hoping that my presence would be enough to deter any further manhandling. If Opatia was impressed, he hid it manfully. He knocked Amelie down with a quick right to the ear and, when I stepped

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forward, feinted with his right and knocked me down with a left to the side of the neck. His talents were strictly wasted as a gardener and practical joker.

I shook my head and climbed shakily to my feet with ashes in my mouth and fire in my eye. By the time I'd cleared the cobwebs from my mind, neither Amelie nor Opatia was in sight. I heard shouts and curses nearby and blundered back through the obstacle course of the ruins in the direction of the bus. As soon as I stepped out of the yellow beams I could see that the Rapariis were mixing it up again against the side of the bus. She had her arms wrapped around him and he was struggling to free himself from her octopuslike embrace.

Now that I was primed, I told myself that handling a middle-aged Tahitian gardener shouldn't be beyond my capabilities. I took a step forward and was immediately proven wrong. He broke Amelie's grip and threw her directly against me. Her feet tangled with mine and once again I was lying on the ground, this time with my client more or less in my arms. It took awhile to get ourselves sorted out and back to our feet. Then I had to wrap my arms around Amelie once again to keep her from jumping back into the fray.

"Why don't we all calm—" I began, when the sudden glare of a match being lit silenced me. Amelie screeched loudly into my ear, startling me so much that I nearly let her go. Why would Opatia be lighting a match? I wondered. And why was he turning away with it? Suddenly my eyes bulged. Was that a match that Opatia was dropping into the side of his wife's bus? Into the *gas tank?*

Amelie squirmed like an eel in my arms and the sudden frantic motion snapped me back to life. "Stop him!" she screamed, but who cared about stopping a madman from blowing up a homemade bus? I turned and pushed the woman in my arms as hard as I could into the darkness. I tottered off balance for a moment, trying desperately to keep my footing, then turned and fled with all the speed that absolute fear can lend.

But I hadn't taken more than a step and a half when the blackness around me suddenly became a dazzling orange-yellow and I found myself being lifted from my feet by an enormous hand and being tossed helplessly through the warm night air. After that I don't remember anything at all.

Alexandre Tama wasn't quite the biggest man I'd ever seen, just the fattest. The biggest overall was a Japanese sumo wrestler I'd

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met in New Caledonia who was a couple of inches taller but maybe a fraction slimmer, if that's the correct word, around the belly. Tama was tall for a Tahitian, nearly my height, but two or three Joe Caneilis could have stepped into either one of his pants legs. Tahitians have always admired fat people, so I guess it's no surprise they've chosen their all-category champion fatty as their chief of police.

The *commissaire* ran a hand through his thick black hair, then pulled a bright red bandanna from his dark blue trousers and dabbed at the sweat that glistened on his moonlike face. He scowled at me ferociously. "I wonder what possessed you to become a detective, Monsieur Caneili?" He waved the enormous slab of his mahogany-colored hand to encompass the charred ruins of two houses and the twisted metal remains of what had once been a homemade yellow and green bus. "Your neighbor's house is burnt to the ground, your *own* house is burnt to the ground, your so-called client is in the prison infirmary with a broken ankle and multiple contusions, her means of livelihood has been destroyed, and you yourself have a broken arm." If possible, his scowl deepened, "Is that what *you* would call a successful weekend of detecting?"

I gritted my teeth and awkwardly shifted the heavy plaster cast in its sling. I thought he was overstating the case a little, but I had to admit it was a point of view. I stepped out of the bright sunlight and back into the shade of an ancient breadfruit tree that had somehow survived all the recent infernos. My arm hurt, my head ached, my legs were wobbly. I felt angry and depressed and guilty.

"If she'd been sitting in jail where she belonged," I said with a surly scowl of my own, "she wouldn't have been driving around in her bus so that her husband could blow it up."

Commissaire Tama's face darkened and the fingers of his great hand clamped painfully around my good arm. "I don't recall *you* coming to the station to swear out a complaint after your house was burned down," he said in a dangerous voice. "And bringing her along with you."

"So put me in jail and beat me. How do you think *I* feel?"

His cold brown eyes stared angrily at mine, then a vast sigh rippled the snowy white shirt that billowed across his tremendous belly, and his hand fell away from my arm. "I'm too soft-hearted to be in this job," he muttered. He turned and began to bellow orders to the three uniformed Tahitian *mutois* who were poking about the ruins. The French are very hot on reenacting crimes and accidents.

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I didn't know just which this would be classified as, but if they feel like it, the French can make a crime out of almost anything.

"So where were you standing when you first saw Raparii light the match?" Tama demanded.

"About here, I suppose."

"Hrmph. And you didn't think to put it out."

"I'd like to see *you* snatch a burning match out of the mouth of an open gas tank!" I retorted sharply.

He grunted skeptically and ran his hand through his glossy black hair again as his eyes moved slowly from one end of the charred bus to the other. "I don't understand how this wretched Raparii didn't blow himself into a million pieces. You're *certain* he was standing there when it blew up?"

"I'm not certain of anything. I told you—I was running for my life."

"Hrmph. The doctors say he's not even as badly off as his wife. He'll be out of the hospital and into jail by the end of the afternoon."

"All because he bought a winning tombola ticket," I marveled. "How long will he get in jail?"

Tama shrugged his massive shoulders. "Probably a couple of years, but with a suspended sentence. His wife is refusing to swear a complaint."

"Women," I muttered. "Love. Arsonists. Bombers. Practical jokers. It's all too much for a tired old legionnaire." I tried to throw up my hands in disgust and only succeeded in provoking an agonizing pain in my broken arm.

Tama grunted angrily. "Well? What *did* this idiot Raparii do with the money he won?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. He never got around to telling me."

His snort this time was a veritable trumpet-call of derision. "I pray God I shall never need to hire *you* as a detective."

I was about to rejoin in kind when we turned at the incessant clamor of a large open-bed delivery truck honking to draw our attention. Behind the battered cab four bare-chested Tahitian workmen lounged against a number of large wooden crates.

The horn blared again.

"Stop that sound at once!" shouted Tama in a fury. "How *dare* you honk at me?"

"Pardon, monsieur," muttered the driver. "It wasn't you I was honking at." He waved a grimy piece of paper at the *commissaire.*

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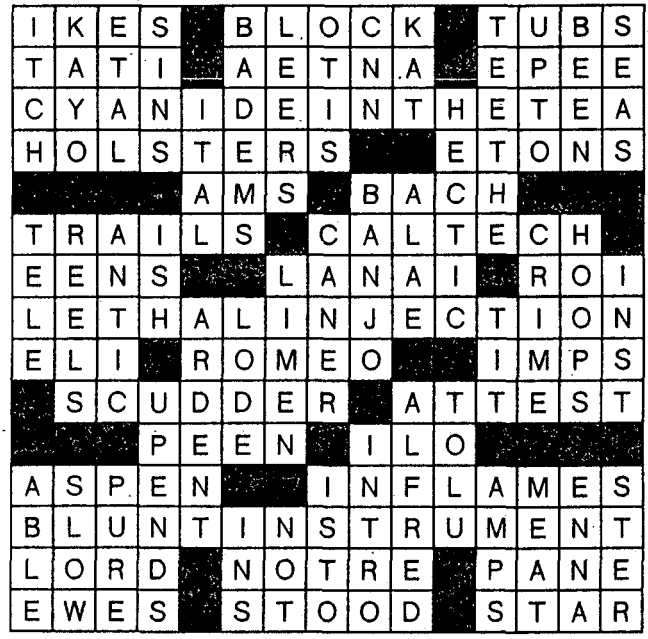
"I'm just trying to find the house of a Monsieur Raparii."

"Indeed. For what purpose?"

The driver blinked. "Why, to deliver all this stuff," he said, gesturing at the back of his truck. "It's the furniture he ordered last week for his house." He pointed at the clumsily drawn map in his hand. "It looks like it's supposed to be up this road." His eyes moved from the blackened wreckage around us to Alexandre Tama to me. "Please, messieurs, can you tell me where I can find the domicile of Opatia Raparii? All this furniture—it's supposed to be a surprise for his wife."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD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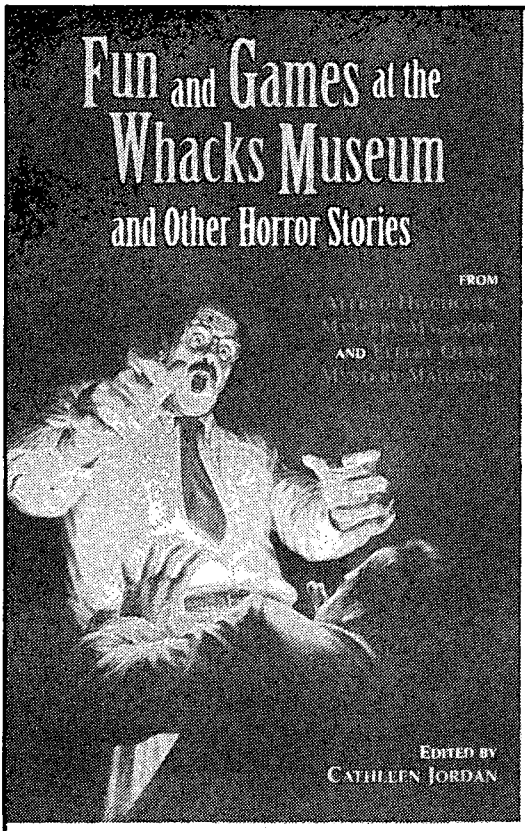

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a *NEW* short story by

CATHERINE AIRD

For nearly thirty years Catherine Aird has been entertaining readers with a series of police procedurals set in the fictional town of Calleford, England. Her output has consisted mainly of novels, but such ventures into the short form as the following demonstrate the sharp wit and powers of observation that inform her longer work. Ms. Aird's most recent book is a collection of short stories entitled Injury Time *(St. Martin's Press) . . .*

THE MAN WHO ROWED FOR THE SHORE

by CATHERINE AIRD

Norman Pace only made one mistake when he murdered his wife. That was to engage Horace Boller of the estuary village of Edsway and his boat *The Nancy* for the final disposal at sea of Millicent Pace's ashes. Norman didn't know, of course, at the time he did it, that hiring Horace Boller's motorboat would be his only mistake.

By the time he came to do so he thought—and with good reason—that all danger of detection was well and truly past and that he would very soon be able to give the nubile young lady in Personnel—she who saw no distinction, semantic or otherwise, between Personnel and Personal—more of his attention than would have been prudent as a married man.

Besides which, he was then considering something which had turned out to be an unexpected problem. If anyone had told him beforehand that the main point of discussion with his wife's family attendant upon her murder would be a sartorial one, he would have

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laughed aloud; had he been the sort of man who laughed aloud—which he wasn't.

The right clothes—rather, the correct ones—to wear for the ceremony of casting Millicent's ashes into the sea had considerably exercised the mind of her brother, Graham Burnett, too. In fact the two men even discussed the matter at length—oddly enough it was manifest that the two brothers-in-law were on friendlier terms now than they had been before Millicent's death.

This was no accident. Norman had realised very early on that his main danger of detection in the murder would come from Millicent's brother Graham—a chartered accountant with a mind trained to expect cupidity in those with whom he dealt—money bringing out the best in nobody at all. In the little matter of averting his brother-in-law's possible suspicions, Norman Pace felt he had been really rather clever.

First of all, as all the good books suggested in the matter of winning support from those who you have reason to suppose do not like you, he had asked Graham a favour. Taking him quietly aside after luncheon on Christmas Day he had said, "I wonder, old man, if I might put you down as one of my executors? I've got to go over to the States in the spring for the firm and I thought I'd tidy up my affairs first. I've never really enjoyed flying, and you never know these days, do you?"

"Of course." If Graham Burnett was surprised at the request his professionalism was far too ingrained for him to let surprise show in his face. "Only too happy to help."

"I know you'd look after Millicent anyway if anything happened to me," he had said, "and so it seemed easier to make it all legal."

"Much better," said the accountant firmly.

"By the way," he had murmured as they had rejoined their respective wives, "will you remember if anything does happen that I want to be cremated—we both do, actually."

"I shan't forget," promised Graham Burnett.

And he hadn't.

When Millicent Pace had died while Norman was safely in America, Graham had arranged for his sister to be cremated—as Norman had been sure he would. The fact that Norman was not able to be contacted in the United States of America at the critical moment was also the result of some careful forward planning. After his business was done, Norman had set off for Milwaukee to visit a second cousin there.

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Actually, the second cousin wasn't there because he had died the year before, but Norman had carefully neither mentioned the fact nor acknowledged the letter apprising him of it. Just before the time that he had calculated Millicent would have died, he checked out of his New York hotel without leaving a forwarding address and set off for Milwaukee. That he chose to do the journey by long-distance bus would, he knew, come as no surprise to his wife's family, among whom he had a fairly well-deserved reputation for being "ower careful with the bawbees."

His colleagues would not have been unduly surprised by his economy either. Always very attentive to his expense claims, he was more than inclined to parsimony when it came to subscription lists and whip-rounds at work. In fact, the only person either at work or among his family and friends who might have been surprised at his frugality was the nubile young lady in Personnel, upon whom he had already lavished several gifts—but then she had been brought up by her mother on the well-attested aphorism that it was better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave. . . .

In the United States, Norman had been written off very early as a tightwad, and it was this knowledge of his basic meanness which had led his brother-in-law Graham to turn down the undertaker's offer to keep Millicent Pace's body in a refrigerator until her husband's return. Finding out what it had cost to leave the coffin in the Chapel of Rest (Graham Burnett suspected that most of the time this was the shed at the back of the undertaker's yard) had already seriously alarmed him. As an accountant he was accustomed to breaking bad financial news and he did not relish it. The prospect of adding fiduciary complaint to Norman's personal grief did not appeal to him at all and he accordingly took the responsibility for arranging his sister's prompt cremation—as Norman had been sure he would.

On his visibly distressed return from Milwaukee, via New York, where sad messages had awaited him, Norman Pace had listened to a long account of illness and death with suitable mien.

"I can assure you, Norman, everything that could be done was done," said Graham in careful, neutral—but unctuous—tones that he could only have picked up from the undertaker.

"The doctor . . . " said an apparently brokenhearted Norman.

"He was marvellous," said Graham swiftly. "He couldn't do enough for poor Millicent."

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Norman had bowed his head. "I'm glad to hear it." In fact, his brother-in-law had never said a truer word. The only thing the old fool had been able to do for Millicent had been to write her death certificate. The really important thing was that he had not associated any of her symptoms—abdominal pain and vomiting leading to heart failure—with poisoning by thallium.

Even more importantly, neither he nor the other doctor who subsequently also signed the cremation certificate had associated those everyday symptoms with Norman, by then in faraway Milwaukee. One of the undoubted attractions of thallium as a poison was the valuable delay in the onset of symptoms—it could be as long as forty-eight hours—as well as the peerless advantages of its being odourless, tasteless, and colourless.

The only drawback of thallium known to Norman was that it was not only detectable in bone after death but survived in cremated ashes. The disposal of Millicent's ashes at sea thus became more than mere ceremony. Graham Burnett and his wife, not being privy to the real reason for the scattering of the ashes at sea, saw it only as an occasion. Hence the discussion about what to wear.

"I'm hoping for good weather, of course," said Norman, "but don't forget that it's always colder at sea than ashore."

"That's what Neil says too," said Graham. Neil was his son, a bright lad with all the cleverness of a born clown. "I don't know about you, Norman, but even so I don't think a yellow sou'wester is quite right."

"No," agreed Norman, adding judiciously, "but then neither is my black. Not at sea."

"I hope you won't mind," said Graham, "but Neil says he's going to wear his kagoule."

"I think," said Norman with unaccustomed magnanimity, "that everyone should put on whatever they feel most comfortable in."

"So shall we say that dignified yet practical wear is the order of the day?" said Graham Burnett, who liked summing up.

Horace Boller, boatman, wore his usual working clothes for the expedition. Whether he knew it or not, the fisherman's jersey which he had on complied with a long tradition of Aran knitting where each seaman's jersey was of a slightly different pattern, the better to identify the drowned.

Horace's deplorable garment could have been confused with no one else's—dead or alive. Norman Pace regarded him and his cluttered boat with distaste.

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"You do understand, don't you, that we must be outside the three-mile territorial limit before it is legal for me to scatter my wife's ashes in the sea?" said Norman, who had his own reasons for being well out to sea before unscrewing the flask containing the mortal remains of Millicent. The said flask was nestling safely in the inner pocket of the new raincoat which Norman had seen fit to purchase for the occasion.

"Leave it to me, guv'nor," said Boller, whose regard for the letter of the law was minimal and for its spirit nonexistent. "And watch that bit of coaming as you come aboard, if you don't mind. I've been having a peck of trouble with it. Now, be very careful . . ."

Conversation on board, stilted to begin with, thawed a little as Boller's boat turned out into the estuary from Edsway and headed for the open sea, and Neil Burnett revealed himself as knowledgeable about birds.

"Common sandpiper," he said in response to a question from his mother. She had settled on a tasteful grey outfit with plastic raincoat handy. "And that's a ringed plover."

"I suppose that one's a little twit," said Angela, Neil's fiancée, who had insisted on joining the party to underline her new status as a potential member of the Burnett family. She too was wearing a kagoule.

Family solidarity on Norman's side was represented by two late-middle-aged sisters who were his cousins. Old enough to be veteran funeral-goers and therefore experienced mourners, they were kitted out in dark slacks and blazers left over from a Mediterranean cruise of long ago.

"I think it's a silly little goose," responded Neil, giving Angela a quick hug.

This by-play on the part of the young ostensibly passed Norman Pace by, although he was obscurely gratified by the presence of Enid and Dora, who had not heard about the cremation in time to attend. He had taken up a rather aloof stance at the prow of the boat, looking out to sea, and letting his back give every appearance of a man thinking his own thoughts—if not actually communing with the deep. Horace Boller very nearly spoilt this *tableau vivante* by opening the throttle of the motorboat without warning just at the moment when they left the salt-marsh estuary behind and hit the open sea.

"Tide on the turn, I expect," said Graham Burnett knowledgeably. He audited the books of several fishing enterprises in Kinnisport and thus felt qualified to give an opinion.

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"Why are we going east and not straight out to sea?" demanded Norman, who was more observant.

"Got to get the church at Marby juxta Mare in line while I can still see Cranberry Point, haven't I?" said Horace Boller glibly. He paused, craftily waiting for the contradiction which would indicate that anyone on board *The Nancy* knew anything about nautical miles. It was not forthcoming so he went on, "Otherwise I shan't know exactly how far out I am, shall I?"

Norman turned back to the bow. He'd struck a hard bargain with Boller but he didn't want the fisherman telling the whole party so. Horace Boller was still smarting from it, though, and had no intention of going half a mile farther out to sea than he could get away with.

When he had gone nearly as far from land as he deemed necessary, Horace turned *The Nancy* about just enough to make the motorboat pitch fractionally. Mrs. Burnett was the first to notice.

"It isn't going to get rough, is it?" she asked timorously. "I'm not a very good sailor."

Horace Boller throttled the engine back before grunting noncommittally.

One of the effects of slowing the motorboat's speed was that it also began to roll ever so slightly.

Cousin Enid unfortunately chose to be bracing. "Remember the Bay of Biscay, Dora, that time we were on our way back from Lisbon?"

"Don't remind me," pleaded Dora. "It was dreadful, simply dreadful."

Horace Boller went through a charade of examining the sea and sky and looking anxious. He reduced the speed of the motorboat until it was scarcely making any headway at all, saving fuel the while.

"Haven't we gone far enough?" said Graham Burnett.

"Distances at sea are very deceptive," observed Cousin Enid. "It's always farther than you think."

"And later," hissed Neil irrepressibly to Angela.

Norman Pace, standing in the prow, was aware that the boat was now beginning to wallow in the water. He patted the flask containing the ashes. How right he had been not to scatter them on land where they might one day have been sought by a diligent constabulary. Strewing them on the waves met every possible requirement.

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"Should be all right now," said Boller. "Can't see St. Peter's spire at Collerton anymore."

That this was because it was behind the headland he did not see fit to explain. Instead he turned *The Nancy* about, switched off the engine, and suggested to Norman that he came and stood at the lee side. "Can't strew ashes into wind, can you?" said Boller grumpily. "They'll only blow back at you."

Nothing loath, Norman clambered back into the well of the boat and then, helped by Graham, stepped up onto the seating which ran round the inside of the tiny deck. He took out the flask from the crematorium, still slightly disconcerted that that fine white dust could contain all that had come between him and the young lady from Personnel.

"Steady as she goes," quipped Neil unnecessarily. The nautical double-entendre went unappreciated, all eyes being on Norman as he held the flask between his hands for a decent moment before unscrewing it. Enid and Dora, he was happy to see, were standing at attention—at least as far as they were able to do in the rocking boat.

In fact, Cousin Enid, always game, appeared to be saying some private prayer—for which Norman was grateful since he found no words coming spontaneously to his own lips and the silence was a bit unnerving.

It was unfortunate that just as Enid had got to "Eternal Father, Strong to save, Whose arm doth bound the restless wave. . . ." a very restless wave indeed caught *The Nancy* amidships. It was even more unfortunate that this happened just as Norman was about to unscrew the flask containing Millicent.

He lost his footing and the flask at the same moment.

"Butterfingers," murmured young Neil, not quite sotto voce enough.

"Oh, my God!" said Norman, losing his cool as well as his footing and the flask, which was now bobbing briskly away from the stationary boat.

"It's not God's fault," said Dora quietly in the eminently reasonable tones that must have accounted for the deaths—should they have used them, too—of quite a number of early Christian martyrs. On religious matters her docility was always troublemaking.

Any naval disciplinary court would have had no difficulty in holding Horace Boller—rather than God—to blame, since he should never have allowed the boat to drift in the sort of sea he did, being

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amongst other things, a hazard to shipping. As Their Lordships of the Admiralty were not called upon to pay for Horace's fuel—and he was—he remained untroubled.

Until, that is, Norman turned on him. "Quick, start the engine. . . . Look, it's floating about. . . . Just there. Hurry, man, hurry, or we'll lose her."

With maddening calm Horace Boller applied himself to the engine. Everyone else on board rushed to the port side of *The Nancy*.

"Mind that coaming!" shouted Boller.

"Never mind your blasted coaming," shouted back Norman, who had turned a nasty shade of puce. "Get that engine going. Quickly, quickly . . . Keep your eyes on her, everyone."

The engine of the motorboat gave a little cough and then reluctantly sprang to life.

"Follow that flask. . . ." Norman implored Boller urgently.

"Yoicks! Tally ho!" said Neil.

"Neil, you are awful," said Angela.

"She went that way. . . ." said Norman, since the flask could now be seen only intermittently bobbing on the waves.

"That way," said Cousin Dora, pointing in a different direction.

"She's over there," said Graham's wife distantly. She'd always rather liked her sister-in-law and thought the whole expedition unseemly.

"Where?" Norman clutched her arm. "Which way?"

Graham Burnett said nothing at all: but his brother-in-law's patent dismay gave him furiously to think.

So did his next exchange with Boller.

"What sort of a tide is this?" Norman demanded, advancing on the boatman.

"Flow," said Boller testily. "Now, which way is it you want me to go?"

It was too late. Of the little flask containing the mortal remains of Millicent there was now nothing whatsoever to be seen.

"If we don't catch her," Norman asked the fisherman, "where will she fetch up?"

"De profundis," murmured Enid.

"Dead man's reach," whispered Neil to Angela, who gave him a little shove in response.

"Billy's Finger," said Boller without hesitation. "Spit of shingle in the estuary where the tide turns. . . ."

"A dead spit. . . ." murmured Neil in Angela's ear.

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"You'll find her there by morning, guv'nor," promised Boller. "No problem."

There was a problem, though.

For Norman, anyway.

Millicent's ashes had indeed fetched up on Billy's Finger in the estuary of the river Calle by morning, but then so had Detective Inspector Sloan and Detective Constable Crosby, advised (Graham Burnett would never have used the expression "tipped off") by Millicent's brother that there might be a message for them in the bottle.

There was.

As Millicent, his late wife, would have said, it was just like Norman to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar. ●

DETECTIVERSE

COFFEE OLÉ

by MARIE E. TRUITT

Fred's morning cup of Java Mama fixed a special way,
A kind of cosmic juice to catapult him through each day.
But once he married, breakfasts were the nastiest of scenes;
On making coffee, Wifie didn't know a hill of beans.
The bitter taste! . . . the inch-deep dregs! . . . he couldn't take much more!
It went from bad to mega-bad, till Fred let out a roar:
"I've had enough! It's Splitsville! There's just no other course!
And I hold within this cup, my Dear, the grounds for our divorce!"
" 'Till death us two should part!' " she screamed. "And that's how it'll stay!"
"Dead right, as usual," he purred. "The answer's clear as day."
He chose the coffee-maker . . . seemed the fitting thing to do. . . .
"Dead right, my Pet!" . . . and then, robustly, split her bean in two.

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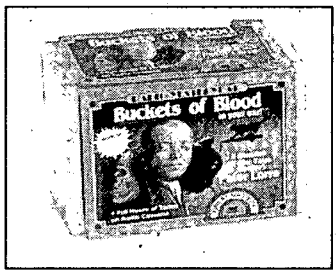

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Pursuing his eccentric career as a thief of valueless objects has made Nick Velvet into a jack-of-all-trades; but Snake Charmer is a role for which he is singularly unprepared. Fortunately, Nick has his wits to compensate with when an old friend lures him to the markets of Marrakesh . . .

THE THEFT OF THE SNAKE CHARMER'S BASKET

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Sandra Paris, a specialist in the commission of bizarre crimes who was sometimes known as the White Queen, had been in Marrakesh only a few hours when the two men started following her. She noticed them first as she entered the Place Djemaa el Fna, a vast open square of shops crowded with fruit and spice sellers, ironmongers and barbers, musicians and snake charmers.

Sandra was a tall, attractive American in her thirties with an angelic face framed by platinum-blond hair. Moving among the Moroccan natives and overweight tourists, she knew she was the focus of attention. It was something that couldn't be helped unless she'd chosen to wear a dark wig and native garb. Even in a city of more than a half-million people, someone like Sandra Paris stood out.

She knew little of Arabic, the official language, but one shop had a sign posted in French and English. She entered and asked, "Which way to the snake charmers?"

The little shopkeeper shrugged. "They come and go. Look for a storyteller named Gulez at the far end of the square."

Sandra Paris returned to the sweltering, sun-baked square and made her way through the crowd to the other end. Almost at once

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she was aware of the two men following her, tracking her through the swarm of shoppers and camera-toting tourists. They were dirty and ragged, not the sort who would be looking for a date.

She found the storyteller as promised, seated cross-legged on a bale of hemp. He was a bearded man wearing a belted tunic and a turban, enchanting listeners with what might have been a tale of the Arabian Nights for all she knew. When he noticed her standing there among his audience he switched to passable, accented English for her benefit. It was a story about how the camel got its hump, and she thought she remembered it from Kipling. She waited until the story ended, then joined the others in dropping a few dirham coins into the storyteller's bowl.

"Are you Gulez?" she asked.

"That I am," he replied with a smile, showing a few fruit-stained teeth.

"I was told to ask you about the snake charmers," she said as he gathered up his meager earnings from the bowl. "Will they be coming today?"

"Why would you desire to watch a cobra being charmed when I can enchant you with another story, good lady?" She saw now that he was younger than she'd first supposed, certainly under forty. The beard had deceived her.

"I want a picture," she told him, producing a small camera from her purse. "To show my friends back home."

"Then I am glad to oblige." He hopped down as Sandra moved closer for a better view. Gulez produced a large woven basket about a foot high and two feet across. He removed the lid and glanced inside, then picked up a reeded cane flute with holes along one side.

"You are a snake charmer too?" she asked, amazed.

"In Marrakesh many talents are needed to earn a living, good lady." He placed the flute in his mouth and began to play, resuming his seat on the bale of hemp. As the hypnotic music flowed from the flute his relaxed body began to sway slightly.

Sandra watched as the hooded head of the cobra emerged slowly from the basket, rising higher and higher as if about to strike. She was transfixed by the sight, and when Gulez stopped playing for an instant he had to tell her, "Remember to take your picture."

"What? Oh, thanks!" She raised her camera and snapped the picture.

When he'd finished his performance and returned the serpent to its basket, he explained. "This is an Egyptian cobra. It is both ag-

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gressive and dangerous, but it has one overriding advantage for snake charming—it does not spit like some African cobras. There is no danger of spectators being hit by venom."

"That's a relief," Sandra told him, eyeing the creature with distaste. "Where do you keep it at night?"

"Usually in a cage. You take no chances with an Egyptian cobra." He replaced the lid on the basket and picked up his flute.

"You speak English quite well," she told him.

He shrugged. "I pick it up from the tourists."

As he started out of the square Sandra fell into step beside him. The two men were still following, and she pretended this performer with his snake offered a degree of protection. "Do you live nearby?" she asked.

"Nearby, yes."

"This is my first visit to Marrakesh."

"I supposed it was. Tourists rarely pay return visits."

"Why is that?"

"Everything may be seen in two days. And the climate does not encourage lingering." He shifted the basket to get a better grip on it.

"Does the snake weigh much?"

He smiled at her through the beard. "It is my snake. It is not too heavy to carry."

They'd left the Place Djemaa el Fna, passing now through an area of tents that housed merchants who had journeyed here to sell their products. Beyond the tents, still well within the city's ramparts, was a run-down residential district.

Sandra knew the men were still following her and she hoped he'd notice them. "Where did you learn all those stories?" she asked.

"I steal them from books I read," he admitted. Then, "Do you know we are being followed?"

She nodded. "Two men. They were after me in the square."

"We must do something about that. Come in with me for a moment while I put away the cobra."

He led the way up a flight of stone steps to a dingy two-room apartment. In the main room was a wire-mesh cage. Gulez carefully removed the serpent from its basket, holding it just below the head so it could not strike at him. He dropped it into the cage and locked the lid. The room was drab and sparsely furnished. Sandra could see the corner of a bed in the next room but had no desire to investigate further.

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"I must be going," she decided suddenly. She'd seen what she came for.

"Who are those men?" he asked.

"I never saw them before."

He considered the situation for a moment. "There's a back way out of here. Come with me."

She followed him down a narrow passage to the back stairs. They led to a little alleyway and he stayed with her for a few blocks until they were sure it was safe. "Thank you," she said. "I'll be all right now."

"Attractive American women are always a target. Be careful. If those men reappear, call the police."

"I will," Sandra promised. She shook his hand. "I enjoyed meeting you."

They parted a few blocks from her hotel. She covered the distance quickly, without looking back. When she reached the lobby, Hashim Bey was seated in an oversized cane chair against the far wall. She walked directly to him. "Two men have been following me all afternoon."

"We must be careful. There are others after the basket." He handed her a slim envelope of money from his inside pocket. "The rest when you deliver it."

"What if something goes wrong?"

"Then you are on your own, Miss Paris. I will be on the first plane out of here." He made a little bow as they parted.

Sandra Paris went up to her room, showered, and changed for dinner. She ate lightly at the hotel, already plotting her moves for morning. She'd always been an early riser, which accounted for her motto: *Impossible things before breakfast.* The following morning she was up before the sun, dressed in a black catsuit which she knew was highly inappropriate for a woman in a Moslem country. With luck she'd be back before dawn.

The Hotel les Almoravides was the closest to the square, and she'd chosen it for that reason. When Hashim Bey hired her to steal the basket she supposed the snake charmer would live near the square, possibly in one of the tents. He would not want to transport the serpent long distances every day. Actually, the two men who'd followed her had helped her accomplish the first part of the mission, giving her the location and layout of his apartment. She could find her way back in the dark, which was exactly what she was doing now.

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When she reached the building where Gulez lived, she pulled a black hood over her head and moved soundlessly up the back steps to his apartment. The locked room presented no obstacle. She was inside within seconds. A gentle snoring from the bedroom told her that the snake charmer was peacefully asleep. She moved to the wicker basket and lifted the lid, shining her penlight inside. She saw only a cluster of dead leaves at the bottom. Sandra doused her light and stuck her gloved hand down among them, searching for something of value.

The bite was instantaneous, the pain indescribable. She screamed in spite of herself and fell back as the great Egyptian cobra reared up from the basket, its deadly fangs sunk deep into her arm. Oddly, in the instant before she lost consciousness, her final thought was of Nick Velvet.

Gloria came into the kitchen carrying a sheet of paper. Nick looked up from his morning toast and coffee as she said, "This came in on your fax machine during the night."

Only a handful of business associates knew his fax number. He accepted the sheet and read the brief handwritten words. *Recovering from cobra bite at Marrakesh Hospital. I need you! Sandra.*

"Sandra Paris," Gloria said. They knew no other Sandra.

"It's not her handwriting."

"The snake probably bit her on the right hand so she dictated the note to a nurse."

He smiled. "You should have been a detective."

She poured him more coffee. "Are you going?"

"To Marrakesh? It's halfway around the world."

"Just North Africa. You could probably get a connecting flight in London or Paris."

"You want me to go?"

Gloria smiled sadly. "She's helped you once or twice. If she really needs you—"

Nick had to admit he'd never had such an appeal from Sandra Paris before. A cobra bite wasn't exactly an everyday event, even for the White Queen. There was a story behind it, perhaps one he'd be interested in hearing. With Gloria's urging he caught a night flight to London, changing there for Marrakesh. Under a hot Moroccan sun the following afternoon he arrived at his destination.

Menarsa Airport was a brief four miles from the walled city. Nick checked in at his hotel and then took a taxi to the nearby hospital.

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He knew nothing of Arabic, and he was relieved to hear some French being spoken. A nurse led him down the corridor to Sandra's room. "Only ten minutes," she warned. "The patient is still very weak."

Sandra Paris was sitting propped up on pillows, her right arm encased in bandages. "God, Nick!" she almost yelled. "It's great to see a friendly face!" The color was drained from her flesh and he could see she was far from recovered.

"What happened, Sandra? What are you doing here?" He bent to kiss her on the cheek, something he'd never imagined himself doing before.

"I got bitten by a cobra—an Egyptian cobra. They don't spit but they sure do bite!"

"When did this happen?"

"What day is it—Thursday?"

"That's right. Thursday afternoon."

"It was early Tuesday morning."

"Before breakfast."

"Of course!" She shifted painfully on the pillows and he tried to help. "No, no—I can manage. It's just this arm. They cut away a chunk of it around the wound."

"You're lucky you're not dead."

Sandra regarded him through half-closed eyes. "*You're* lucky I'm not dead! It would take half the fun out of your life."

He didn't deny it. "Where did this happen, at the zoo?"

"I doubt if they even have a zoo. Why should they, when you have camels and cobras loose on the streets?" She changed her position again. "It happened in a snake charmer's apartment. I had my hand in his basket."

"I'll bet." Nick pulled up a chair and sat down. "Suppose you tell me about it from the beginning."

"It's a pretty dull story."

He smiled at her. "I just spent the better part of twelve hours on planes. It better not be too dull!"

"The man is a storyteller and snake charmer who works the crowd in the Place Djemaa el Fna. It's a square at the center of the city, full of merchants and street performers. I went there to meet him and found I was followed by a couple of local goons. He took me home with him till we could shake them. I checked the lock and got the layout of the place. He took the cobra from its basket and put it in a cage. Only when I went there before dawn the snake was back in the basket under some leaves."

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"It's a wonder you're not dead."

"I almost was! The doctor says the only thing that saved me was that the snake had been fed a rat the night before and used some of its venom on that. It wasn't back up to full strength when I made my move."

"What were you trying to steal?" Nick asked.

The smile disappeared. "I don't know. I was being foolish, Nick, and I suppose I got what I deserved."

"Tell me."

She sighed. "I did some work in Rome for a man named Mazolli. Apparently it involved a Mafia doublecross of some kind. Mazolli was dead before I could collect my fee and I was left with a briefcase full of travel folders sent from a man named Hashim Bey."

"Bey's in the travel business?"

"As a front for other things. He'd mentioned once that there was a pipeline through Marrakesh for some sort of contraband. In Mazolli's papers Bey and I found a recent travel folder with pictures of the Place Djemaa el Fna. One showed a snake charmer with his flute in a typical pose, with the cobra coming up out of the basket. The basket itself—not the snake—had been circled in ink, apparently by Mazolli."

"So you went after the basket?"

Sandra nodded. "I wanted to recover some payment for my work and Bey paid me to steal it. The other morning when I peered into it with my penlight all I saw were some dead leaves. The snake was under them."

"Did this snake charmer—"

"His name's Gulez."

"—Gulez get you to the hospital?"

"I was unconscious by then, but he apparently called for help. I haven't seen him since. And Bey apparently skipped town. I needed you."

Nick nodded. "I'll get a ticket so you can fly back home with me."

"Not without that basket!" she insisted.

"Be reasonable, Sandra. There's nothing in the basket except a cobra."

She reached out to touch his arm. "Get it for me, Nick. That's the least I deserve after losing a piece of my arm to that creature."

"I value my life more than that. Snakes and I don't get along. When are they letting you out of this place?"

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"Probably Saturday, the doctor said. Two more days. He wants to be sure I don't get an infection."

She told him everything and Nick finally agreed to seek out the snake charmer, Gulez. "I haven't promised to steal the basket, though," he insisted.

"I know you'll do what you can, Nick."

When he left the hospital he planned to head directly to the Place Djemaa el Fna. His plans changed abruptly when a slender bearded man approached him near the front entrance. "You are the friend of Sandra Paris?"

"I know her, yes," Nick admitted.

"I am Gulez. It was in my apartment where the cobra bit her."

Nick nodded and introduced himself. "Have you been to see her?"

The bearded man shook his head. "It was a terrible accident and naturally she blames me for it. I could not face her, but I come daily to learn of her condition. The nurse told me today that an American friend was with her. How is she?"

"Coming along. Tell me how it happened."

Gulez answered in hushed tones. "She came to see the snake charmers. After my performance she seemed frightened by two men who were following her. I walked with her and finally took her to my apartment to avoid them. Later in the night, she must have gotten too close to the basket and my cobra bit her."

"She stayed there with you?"

"In all innocence! She feared the men who were following her."

It wasn't exactly the story Sandra had told, but Nick let that pass for the moment. "I'd like to see your performance. Are you in the Place Djemaa el Fna every day?"

"Every day that shops are open. Come in the morning and I will give a special performance with my cobra."

Nick promised to be there. The man seemed open and friendly enough. If there was a secret involving his basket perhaps he didn't even know about it. The two men parted and Nick continued on to his hotel. He found someone else waiting in the lobby.

"Are you Nick Velvet?" the man asked. He wore a rumpled white suit and could have used a shave, but his accents were American. Nick guessed his age to be around forty, based mainly on the thinning brown hair that was flat against his head.

"That's me." There was no sense denying the obvious.

"I'm Morgan Herty. I don't suppose you've heard of me."

"The name—" Nick began uncertainly.

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"I'm a novelist. Largely unread but I keep trying. Been coming to Marrakesh for ten years now. Could we have a drink and talk?"

"I suppose so." Nick followed the man into the hotel lounge and they sat facing each other at a little circular table. Both ordered glasses of the local wine, which Herty assured Nick was quite good. After a few sips Nick decided anything might taste good if one drank it for ten years.

"You're here because of what happened to Sandra Paris?"

Nick shrugged. "She's an old friend. There's something a bit frightening about being hospitalized in a strange country when you're alone. She needed me and I came."

"She's a lucky woman. The bite of an Egyptian cobra can be deadly. The best thing you could do would be to get her back home as quickly as possible."

"That's just what I told her," Nick agreed, risking another sip of wine and wondering why Sandra's departure should interest this man. "I hope she'll be on her way home by the weekend. Are you a friend of hers?"

"No. I'm just interested in the story, as a writer. Even in Marrakesh it's not often someone is bitten by a cobra. Perhaps you could tell me how it happened."

"Sandra wasn't too talkative. They've still got her drugged up. You probably know as much as I do."

"I'd like to interview her briefly before she leaves the city."

Nick frowned at the suggestion, as he knew Sandra would. "I don't know if that's going to be possible."

"Ask her about it. See what she thinks." The man finished his wine and stood up. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Velvet. I'll be in touch."

Nick shook his hand. "A pleasure, Mr. Herty."

He sat at the table for a time after the man in the rumpled white suit had departed, wondering what that was all about.

Nick had lost a night's sleep on the flight from New York so he retired early, rising in the morning with a clear head and an empty stomach. After a hotel breakfast, he decided to visit the square where Gulez and his cobra performed. Perhaps he'd have something to report to Sandra, though he wasn't betting on it.

By nine o'clock the Place Djemaa el Fna was already beginning to fill with people. The merchants from the various shops were open for business and the fruit and spice sellers were unloading their wares. Basket sellers displayed great woven towers of their product,

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while men with leather water bottles and tin drinking cups circulated through the crowd selling a cool drink for a couple of dirham. Nick heard the sound of a flute and that led him to Gulez, practicing a few notes while he waited for a crowd to gather.

Tall and thin and bearded, not too old. He could have been Moroccan or Sudanese or even French behind those whiskers. Here in the city square he seemed much more sure of himself than he had outside the hospital the previous afternoon. He smiled and nodded when he saw Nick. Presently, as enough people gathered round, he stopped playing and went over to lift the lid on the basket. Children crowded in to see the coiled serpent and one teenager, braver than the rest, threw gravel into the basket to annoy the sleeping cobra.

"Go on!" Gulez shouted at them. "Go away! My cobra has bitten one person already this week. Do you want to be next?"

His words drove them back and they settled down with the others to watch the show. The bearded man picked up his flute and started to play the ancient melodies of his people. After a moment the cobra's head rose up, flattening into its familiar hood, its weaving motion seeming to follow Gulez's own swaying movements.

Nick watched the whole thing from a distance, fascinated by the spectacle. When Gulez had finished, replacing the lid on the snake's basket and circling through the crowd for donations, Nick commented, "That's quite a performance."

Gulez smiled. "To some extent it's a trick. The music is mainly for effect. The cobra follows the gentle swaying of my body as I play. But the crowd enjoys it. Snake charming is even more popular in India. You should go there if you are truly interested."

"I heard you tell the children your cobra had bitten someone."

"Sandra, of course. Have you been to see her this morning?"

"Not yet."

"I'm going to take the cobra home now and return this afternoon. Perhaps we can go to see her together."

Nick had no objection so he accompanied the bearded man back to his apartment. "Do you perform just twice a day?" he asked as they made their way through the narrow sweltering alleys, retracing the route Sandra Paris had no doubt traveled earlier.

"I am a storyteller too. In the early afternoon, when the sun is at its hottest, I tell stories while the serpent sleeps. Come—up these stairs is my apartment."

Nick observed that the lock on the door was a simple one. It would have given Sandra no trouble at all. Gulez led the way into the

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apartment, carrying the basket carefully in both arms. It was much cooler here, out of the morning sun, and for that Nick was thankful. He never saw the two young men in Arab robes who lay in wait for them, and he had no chance to defend himself before the heavy knob of a walking stick caught him across the left temple.

Nick Velvet fell to the floor, stunned but not unconscious. Through the slit of one open eye he saw them grab onto Gulez and pin him against the wall. "Remove the snake," one of them ordered in English.

"He will do you no good," the charmer insisted. "He performs only for me."

Nick thought he saw the glint of a native dagger. He tried to move but his head seemed bursting with pain. "Take the snake from the basket," one of them ordered.

Gulez did as he was told, keeping a firm grip just below the cobra's head as he lifted it from the basket. "What's in it?" the man with the knobby walking stick asked.

"Only dried leaves," Gulez responded, the knife at his throat.

The first man reached in with his stick, poking around to make certain no second cobra lurked there. Then he pulled out the leaves by the handful, shaking them in the snake charmer's face. "Are these leaves of Indian hemp, for hashish?"

Gulez ignored the blade at his throat and spat on the floor. "They were leaves of the Moroccan cork oak. They have no use, except as bedding for my cobra."

"What else is in there?"

The man with the knife peered into the basket. "Nothing. It's empty."

The first one leaned his stick against the wall and bent to examine it personally. That was the moment Nick had hoped for. With one foot he kicked at the stick, sending it toppling to the floor within easy reach. He grabbed it, catching the ankles of the closest man and bringing him down. The one with the knife loosened his grip on Gulez as he swung around to face Nick. Gulez seized the moment and twisted the blade from his fingers, causing him to yelp with pain.

"Thank you," the snake charmer told Nick.

"What will we do with them?" The one who'd held the knife was sobbing with pain and he suspected the man's fingers were broken.

"I will kill them and dispose of the bodies," Gulez said.

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The two men were still young enough to be frightened. "No!" the one who'd hit Nick pleaded. "We're only doing our job!"

"Who do you work for?" Nick asked.

"The Afrikaner," he answered, before the other ordered him to shut up.

"What's his name?" Nick wanted to know.

But now both of them were silent.

"I'll handle them," Gulez assured him.

Nick's head was still throbbing, but he was in no mood to see murder done. "Let them go," he said. "We know what they look like if they come around again."

An hour later Nick was at the hospital, waiting outside Sandra's door while a nurse checked her vital signs. When he finally entered she was in a chair next to the bed. Her color was better and he could see she was nearly recovered.

"What happened to your face?" she asked as he came in.

"A stupid accident. I bumped into a door."

"The whole side of your head is bruised! It looks recent. You'd better let a doctor see it while you're here."

"I'll be all right," he assured her, perching on the edge of the bed.

"Come on, Nick—what really happened?"

"A couple of goons jumped us at Gulez's apartment. They were after the basket. I suppose they were the same ones that followed you."

"Did they get it?"

"No, and I hope they learned a lesson. I told Gulez to let them go. It was either that or kill them."

She shook her head. "Seems like everyone's striking out trying to steal the basket."

"Not everyone," Nick reminded her. "I haven't had my try yet."

"Did you find out what's in it?"

He shrugged. "A cobra and some dead leaves. Listen, did you ever hear of someone called the Afrikaner?"

She shook her head. "That's a South African of European descent. I don't know any."

"Neither do I. What would someone like that be doing in Morocco?"

"I thought things were relatively peaceful down there these days, since the elections. Of course, there are always troublemakers everywhere."

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"Anything to connect your Mafia friends with an Afrikaner?"

She shook her head. "No."

"What about the basket itself? You've seen it. Could the wicker be valuable somehow?"

"No way," she insisted. "It was just a cheap basket with a lid. They're sold everywhere in the bazaars."

"All right," he decided. "I'm going after it tonight. I'll have it by the time you're released from here tomorrow."

Sandra Paris smiled at him. "Good luck, Nick. Be careful."

He was halfway out the door when he remembered Morgan Herty. "One other thing. There was a writer at my hotel yesterday. He wanted to know if he could interview you. He seemed interested in when you'd be getting out of the hospital."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Not much. You don't want to see him, do you?"

"Not a chance. My business isn't one that craves publicity."

"I'll tell Mr. Herty you're still weak from your experience. Too weak for an interview."

By the time Nick returned to the Place Djemaa el Fna, Gulez had finished his storytelling and removed the lid from the wicker basket. He showed no sign of the morning's ordeal, and their two assailants were nowhere in sight. Nick watched from a distance as the beggar boys tormented the snake again and the bearded charmer tried a few notes on his flute. Then he began playing, and after a moment the cobra's hooded head appeared above the rim of the basket.

"An amazing sight, isn't it?" a voice behind Nick asked. He turned and recognized Morgan Herty, still in his white suit. The pungent odor of his cigarette told Nick he was smoking kif, a form of local marijuana.

"Snakes have always fascinated me," Nick admitted.

"And how is our patient today?"

"Miss Paris? She's coming along."

"Did she agree to see me?"

"I'm afraid not. She just isn't up to it."

"Too bad." He dropped the cigarette in the dust and ground it underfoot. Before them the Egyptian cobra had risen to its full height, its body matching the gentle swaying of the flute player. "I'm sorry about your face," the man in the white suit added.

"So am I. Did you have something to do with it?"

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"Not directly." He glanced around the square. "Can we talk, Mr. Velvet?"

They made their way to a little outdoor cafe in one corner of the square, avoiding the entertainers with their performing monkeys and the dancers who gyrated to native music.

Morgan Herty ordered mint tea and Nick did likewise. "You are the man known as the Afrikaner, aren't you?"

Herty smiled slightly. "Those two that I hired may have referred to me that way." He removed a leather case from the inner pocket of his white suit and opened it for Nick. "These are my credentials."

"Police?" Nick asked with a frown.

"South African Special Branch. I'm up here on assignment."

"To steal a snake charmer's basket?"

He lit another cigarette. "I'll be frank, Mr. Velvet, because I need your help. Certainly you've read about the state of things in the former Soviet Union. You know that large quantities of plutonium are unaccounted for, and some has been offered for sale to terrorists in the West. Some of these terrorists, sadly, are in my country."

"I thought—"

"That things had settled down after the election? Hardly! There are white supremacists still bent on seizing back control of the country. A supply of plutonium and some small tactical nuclear bombs are just the weapons they need."

"Those things must cost a fortune."

"There are men in South Africa who have several fortunes, and would willingly spend them to see the nation restored to white rule."

"Surely you can watch these people, keep them from sending money out of the country."

"We can and we do. Our currency laws are very strict. Still, we know they are getting money out somehow. A Mafia figure named Mazolli had established contact with some renegade Russian physicists. He told them there was money coming from South Africa by a devious route through the continent to Morocco. After Mazolli died—"

"How did he die?"

"That's no concern of ours. The Americans are as interested in this as we are. Sometimes one helps one's friends. Anyway, Mazolli died and it came to light that his contact in the money pipeline was this man Gulez. We expected a Marrakesh banker at the very least. What we found was an itinerant snake charmer. He's been watched day and night for weeks. There's been no contact with any stranger.

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As you may know, Morocco's currency regulations are even stricter than ours. The local dirham cannot be exchanged for foreign currency and cannot be taken out of the country. This is one of the worst places in the world for a pipeline of illegal currency."

Nick Velvet smiled. "Which is exactly why they chose it. An impossible country with a snake charmer as money pipeline. Who would ever suspect it?"

"The two men who attacked you were hired to watch Gulez in the square every day. The only money he ever received was small donations following his act. He met with no one at night, and he usually dined alone. Still, before he died Mazolli indicated the money was being transferred somehow in that wicker basket. The woman, Sandra Paris, is after it. We're after it. And I suppose now that you are too."

"There's nothing in the basket but a cobra."

"Perhaps the cobra is fed a diet of currency," Herty said, allowing himself a slight chuckle that turned into a cough. He tossed away the cigarette. "What about it, Mr. Velvet? Can you do what those men failed at—steal the basket?"

"I'm only a tourist."

"We both know better than that. I asked the Americans to run a check on you. They have quite a dossier. You're a thief who steals valueless things."

"A basket full of money is hardly valueless."

"But you say it's empty!" the South African reminded him. "We don't want the cobra, only the basket."

"Did the dossier tell you my fee?"

"Twenty-five thousand plus expenses."

"That'll do."

"When can you steal it?"

"Is today soon enough?"

Later that afternoon, Nick returned to the square and visited one of the workshops selling baskets. He purchased a dozen that were nearly identical to Gulez's basket. Then he rounded up thirteen children who were playing in the area. He gave them careful instructions and presented each with half of a fifty-dirham banknote. "You get the rest when it's finished," he promised. It was only a bit over five dollars each, but for these children it was enough.

As Gulez was finishing his act awhile later, a peculiar thing happened. One of the children ran up and grabbed the empty basket

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while the snake charmer held up his cobra for a final bow. He shouted at the youth and tried to pursue him, but that was difficult with the snake in hand. Almost at once the running boy was surrounded by a dozen others, all carrying identical wicker baskets. For a few minutes the square seemed filled with running children. Gulez bellowed helplessly and waved his cobra.

Nick Velvet stepped into the midst of the madness and grabbed one of the running boys by the shoulder. He took the basket from him and delivered it to Gulez. "Here—you can put the snake in this."

"It's not my basket!"

"It is now. They're all the same, aren't they?"

"You did this, Velvet!"

But Nick had moved on. The children would be waiting for their money.

It was toward evening when he met with Morgan Herty in the South African's hotel room. Herty accepted the basket and handed over payment in American dollars. He removed the cork-oak leaves that had served as the snake's bedding and carefully examined the interior. "There must be a false bottom to this thing."

"No, I already checked for that. It's just a wicker basket."

"But the money has to be here!"

"It is. Gulez used it as a collection basket as surely as the ones they pass in church."

"Then where—"

"If you want me to explain it to you there might be an additional fee."

There was a knock on the door and Herty got to his feet. "That's probably the night maid to turn down the bed."

He opened the door and was shoved backward immediately by an angry Gulez. "Don't move, Velvet," he ordered, aiming a Walther pistol at Nick. "I've come for the basket."

He entered the room, closing the door behind him. "It's good to see you again," Nick greeted him blandly. "How'd you find us?"

"You don't work for free," the snake charmer replied, his accent subtly changed from North African to something more European. "I figured Herty must have hired you. Now hand me the basket."

Before Nick could decide what to do there was a second knock on the door. Gulez leveled the pistol and called out, "Who is it?"

"Night maid," a woman's muffled voice replied.

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"I don't need you."

"We have to check all the rooms, sir."

"Go away."

"Is something wrong in there?" she persisted.

Gulez kept the gun level as he unlocked the door. "Come in and see, if you insist."

The unlocked door slammed against him, knocking him off balance. Then Sandra Paris was inside, bringing him to the floor and kicking the weapon from his hand.

"Sandra!" Nick could only shake his head in amazement. "What are you doing here?"

She gestured toward the man on the floor. "I was following him. They let me out of the hospital a day early."

They tied the snake charmer's wrists and ankles with a torn bedsheet while Nick explained the situation to Sandra. "Mr. Herty here has paid me to steal the basket you and others have tried to get. Now that he has it, he doesn't know where the money is."

"Do you?"

"I do, and I'll tell him for an additional twenty-five thousand."

"You're mad!" Herty said with an angry growl.

"Then you're never going to know, are you? I'm sure Gulez here isn't about to tell you."

For a moment, it seemed they were at an impasse. Then Morgan Herty sighed and threw up his hands. "It's the government's money, not mine." He opened his shirt and removed some currency from a money belt.

"All right," Nick said, giving it to Sandra to count. "It goes back to Sandra's story of her visit to his apartment the other day, before she was bitten by the cobra. Gulez removed the snake and placed it in a separate cage. This would have made sense except for the fact that when Sandra returned to search the basket that night the cobra was back there and bit her arm. Why had Gulez removed it? To clean it and change the leafy bedding, perhaps, but it also seemed likely he wanted to remove the money he'd collected during the day."

"There was no money," Herty insisted. "My men found nothing yesterday, and I find nothing now. Are you telling me these leaves are pieces of currency?"

"No, but there had to be something else in the basket. Twice today I saw boys pestering the snake, trying to get a rise out of it. I saw a teenage boy throwing pebbles into the basket."

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"Pebbles?"

Nick upended the basket and shook it. Six or eight small pebbles were dislodged and scattered onto the hotel rug. "Bring me a glass of water from the bathroom, Sandra."

Morgan Herty's mouth dropped open. "Are you telling me—?"

Nick dunked the pebbles in the water and carefully washed off the coating of dried mud. "A South African, of all people, should know there are more forms of currency than mere paper money. These are small but perfect diamonds, straight from the Kimberley mines, I imagine. They were smuggled here to Marrakesh, where that teenager was given the task of throwing them, a few at a time, into the cobra's basket. Gulez collected them at the end of the day and passed them on along their route. Soon they would be changed into currency with which to buy the plutonium the terrorists wanted."

"That's all I need," the South African said grimly. "This man will be turned over to the Moroccan police. Their laws are quite strict. I'll deal with the people who supplied these diamonds in the first place."

With the double fee safely in hand, Nick decided he and Sandra should be on their way. Outside, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. It takes more than a cobra bite to keep me down."

"I'll fly back with you tomorrow."

"I'm just sorry I came all this way for nothing."

"It wasn't for nothing," he said. "I'm giving you half the money. After all, you did rescue me."

"You're a good man, Nick Velvet." She started to walk away, then turned to add, "And a smart one, too."

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

I assume readers of this column are enthusiastic readers of crime fiction, but I don't know how many would call themselves serious collectors. Let me alert those few who are to some recent publications involving Lawrence Block, increasingly recognized as one of the giants of the genre. *Murder on Trial* (Signet, $4.99), edited by Cynthia Manson, is a fine anthology of courtroom stories drawn from the pages of *EQMM* and *AHMM*. One of the contributors, prominently featured on the cover, is Lawrence Block. But through a production error, his story, "The Ehrengraf Presumption," was left out of the first printing. When the error was caught, copies were recalled, and subsequent printings have the tale in its proper place. Is a copy from that defective first printing valuable, I wonder? (Surely it would be if it were a stamp!) Would a completist collector of Block want a book where he was advertised on the cover but did not actually appear? A bookdealer friend guesses probably not, but who knows? (I have one. Make me an offer.)

Block, who may be going for a record number of reprinted novels with new introductions, most recently a 1966 paperback original from the Evan Tanner series, *The Canceled Czech* (Penzler/Armchair Detective, $22 trade, $75 signed limited), and the 1977 debut of Bernie Rhodenbarr, *Burglars Can't Be Choosers* (Dutton, $19.95), also has a new short story collection. All the stories about "criminal lawyer" Martin Ehrengraf, most of which first appeared in *EQMM*, have been collected in the beautifully-made *Ehrengraf for the Defense* (A.S.A.P.). Don't look for it at your local mall chain store, though. The cheaper edition, priced at $125, comes in an acrylic slipcase and is limited to 250 copies signed by Block, introduction-writer Edward D. Hoch, and illustrator Phil Parks. For the really high rollers, there's a 26-copy lettered edition, leatherbound with its own book press included, for $350. Copies may still be available from publisher Jim Seels, 23852 Via Navara, Mission Viejo, CA 92961. The same publisher also offers *Maxine O'Callaghan Bibliography 1974-1995*, a slim paperback including two short stories by the creator of Delilah West and brief essays by O'Callaghan, Marcia Muller, and Wendy Horsby, all of whom signed the 200 numbered paperback copies ($12.50) along with illustrator Parks.

**** Michael Clynes: *The Poisoned Chalice*, Penzler, $20. The author first (and best) known as P.C. Doherty, and now a mystery fixture under a variety of pseudonyms, seems to get better as he gets more prolific. The second volume of memoirs of the roguish Sir Roger Shallot, who apparently encountered every famous contemporary of Henry VIII and

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Elizabeth I, combines espionage and detection as young Roger, a Watson who outshines the novel's real principal sleuth Benjamin Daunbey, recounts the search for an English spy for the French known as Raphael, who may be responsible for a series of murders. King Henry, the Great Killer, also charges Roger with the seemingly impossible task of reclaiming a ring from King Francis I of France. The humor, the action, the period details, and the detection combine to mark Doherty/Clynes as the current author most likely to appeal to fans of John Dickson Carr, at least in his historical mode.

*** Bill Pronzini: *With an Extreme Burning,* Carroll & Graf, $19.95. The author of the Nameless private eye series is a consummate professional who brings solid prose and construction and compulsive readability to any kind of popular fiction he attempts. Here it's mainstream suspense, as college professor Dix Mallory, grieving over the recent death of his wife, becomes the target of a telephone tormentor. Pronzini takes a large and well-managed cast through a tale that combines action, romance, mystery, and some serious questions about personal ethics, law, and society.

*** Andrew Klavan: *Corruption,* Morrow, $23. Klavan, who used to write novels about reporter John Wells under the pseudonym Keith Peterson, demonstrates his expertise with journalism backgrounds once again in an intricately-plotted mystery with a soaring prose style that sometimes suggests Thomas Wolfe. The setting is an upstate New York county seat, where the longstanding feud of editor Sally Dawes and Sheriff Cyrus Dolittle comes to a climax during the trial of a drug dealer accused of murdering a lawyer. Another major character is Sidney Merriwether, a newly-hired reporter whose principal experience is having edited a failed literary magazine.

*** Robert K. Tanenbaum, *Justice Denied,* Dutton, $18.95. New York Assistant District Attorney Butch Karp appears for the sixth time in a typically involving prosecutorial procedural. Several cases are involved, the main one the assassination of a Turkish diplomat. The author is a screenwriter and former New York prosecutor who recently made an unsuccessful run for Los Angeles D.A. Quite a few successful fiction writers (make that bylines where the putative author is not really a writer but a public figure in another arena) are assisted by ghost writers or (probably more accurately in this case) unbilled collaborators. Tanenbaum's acknowledgement is commendable for its frankness: ". . . my partner and collaborator, Michael Gruber, whose genius flows throughout this book, and who is primarily responsible for this manuscript." If so, it's a shame Gruber's name doesn't appear on the jacket and title page.

Among the latest reprints from Otto Penzler's Armchair Detective Library is Tony Hillerman's 1980 novel *People of Darkness* ($23 trade, $75 signed limited), one of his best and the book that first introduced Navajo cop and aspiring shaman Jim Chee. The author's new introduction, though a brief two pages, offers

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some interesting insights.

J.P. Hailey, the pseudonym Parnell Hall uses to write the Steve Winslow series of remarkable Erle Stanley Gardner/Perry Mason pastiches, has never before been reviewed in this space, not because I don't love his work but because his hardcover publisher is unaccountably reticent about sending review copies. The third in the series, published in hardcover in 1990 and now in paperback, is *The Underground Man* (Forge, $4.99), which has all the strong points of the series and includes a very Gardneresque figure: the wealthy and elderly eccentric whose relatives want him declared incompetent. Hailey/Hall advises that it was that same publisher who is responsible for giving this book a title already memorably used by Ross Macdonald.

Also new in paperback reprint is a handsome new edition of Robert Barnard's deft and amusing 1983 novel *School for Murder* (Foul Play/Countryman, $6), known in Great Britain as *Little Victims*. The publisher also offers at the same price 1985's *Fete Fatale (Disposal of the Living)*, with other reprints to come from one of the finest writers of detection currently practicing.

Warren Murphy is one of the most versatile and prolific, not to mention funniest, writers in the broad crime fiction field. The welcome reprint of his 1982 paperback original *Digger Smoked Out* (Carroll & Graf, $4.95) bills it as action adventure, but it's really an example of Murphy's considerable ingenuity as a writer of classical fair-play detection. The sleuth is insurance investigator Julian Burroughs (nicknamed Digger), who would later be reinvented as Devlin Tracy (Trace) when the series changed publishers. Let's hope for new editions of the other Diggers—and the Traces as well.

Trace makes a rare short story appearance in "Without a Trace," Murphy's amusing and complexly plotted contribution to *Murder Is My Business* (Dutton, $19.95), edited by Mickey Spillane and Max Allan Collins. Though the title of the anthology may not sound very original, it certainly fits the theme: killing for hire. Also present in new cases are a couple of other characters who seldom appear in short stories, one solidly in the Spillane tradition, the other a surprising participant. Editor Collins's Quarry makes feminists happy in "Guest Services," while Andrew Greeley's Blackie Ryan, one of my favorite priest detectives, is in good form in "The Bishop and the Hitman," a neatly classical puzzle not seriously marred by its obsolete underworld slang. Readers well-steeped in popular fiction will have no trouble recognizing the model for the title character of Stephen Mertz's "The King of Horror," an enjoyable story even if the inside jokes go unrecognized. Editor Spillane's own contribution is the only reprint in the book, the novella "Everybody's Watching Me," an example of stunt construction that launched the memorable crime fiction digest *Manhunt* in 1953.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

Theater in various forms played an important role in Michael Lewin's development as a writer, and it shows in the lively dialogue that is his trademark. As a young graduate student at Cambridge University, Mr. Lewin, an American by birth, became involved in directing student theatrical productions and even performed in several plays. Before long he was writing his own scripts for the BBC. He has been writing novels since 1971, when his series featuring private detective Albert Samson debuted. The latest Samson novel is Called by a Panther *(Mysterious Press).*

CROSS, REMS OF

by MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

Silent from the time he got into the car, the father grew increasingly restive as they passed into the depths of the country. His son's driving was purposeful, if unusually nervous. The boy seemed to have a plan, but his father resented having no idea what it was.

Finally he gave up his protest at the unexpectedly lost Sunday afternoon. He spoke, and said, "Where are you taking me?"

A momentary smile preceded the response. "We'll get to it soon." But the boy seemed to be looking hard at each crossroad. And then he slid, late, from the minor road they were on to an even lesser one.

"So you're looking for a specific place?"

"Yes. Only it's been a long time."

"Since what?"

"What?"

"Was there some memorable event when you were here last?"

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"No, no," the son said. "I just remember it as being an idyllic spot. It occurred to me that it would be a good place for us to have a talk."

But we never talk, the father thought. He said, "I see." He sat back and accepted, again, his fate.

The son's concentration bore sudden fruit. "There it is! There." He pointed.

"Where?"

But the son did not speak again until the car stopped between two trees that grew in the ribbon of land between the country lane and a wire fence. Then he said, "Now over the fence."

"*Over* it?"

"Yeah."

"But isn't there a gate? Or a stile?"

"No gate or stile. Over it, then across that bit of field and there is a descent that runs into the valley. You'll be all right. You're in pretty good shape, for a wrinkly."

"It's not that," the father said. But he looked again at the fence. Its top strand was barbed wire. Oh well. "However did you find this place?"

"On an Ordnance Survey map."

"That you just happened to be reading one day?"

"More or less."

"Very informative," the father said.

The son removed the car key and stared straight ahead. "At the time, I was looking for a new place. Somewhere I hadn't been. To take a friend."

"You're sure it's all right to climb the fence? With no gate or footpath or anything?"

The son breathed a laugh. "Are you worried about a country traffic warden? We're in the wilds here, you know. Law of the jungle."

"It's you who insisted on bringing me here. There's no need to delve into sarcasm."

"Yeah, and I have something to say," the son said as he turned to his father. "Anything you're not going to take with you, we'll put in the boot."

"Will it be cold?"

"Cold? Today? You're joking! It's a valley. It's a sun trap. You won't need the cardy, you really won't."

The father stroked the folded sweater in his lap. "Your mother puts on a show of fussing over me, on your rare visits. She'll pretend to be furious if I haven't put it on."

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"She isn't here, is she? So you don't have to play the game." The son opened his door and got out of the car.

More slowly the father did the same, leaving the sweater on the seat.

The son said, "Your cardy."

"I thought I wouldn't need it."

"I said we'd put it in the boot."

"It'll be all right there, surely."

"We'll put it in the boot."

"Honestly!" the father said.

But the son headed off further comment by saying, "Come on. Humour me. It's my trip, right? I'm the one that wants to talk. Be a good daddy and indulge me."

"All right. All right." The father reopened his door and pulled the folded cardigan out by an arm. Roughly he rolled the garment into a ball. "Catch," he said, and threw it.

The son caught the sweater, dropped it in the boot, and shut the lid. He locked all the car doors without using a key while his father said, "At least it will look worn now."

"Good."

"Does it exceed the rules of your outing to ask whether you feel my cardigan is actually unsafe? Or is there a hidden agenda to your punctiliousness?"

"I was out here once with Pamela."

"Sandra?"

The boy grinned. "Sandra was the wife. I came here with Pamela, in more ways than one."

"Who is Pamela?"

"Ages ago. You remember. She was the physiotherapist."

"Ah ah. Your mother didn't think she was good enough for you."

"Who ever was?"

"Dark-haired girl. A few years older than you."

The son laughed matily. "I always thought you rather fancied old Pam."

"Don't be disgusting."

"We used her car—bigger than mine in those days, don't you know. I told her to leave her bag under the front seat because we were going down to the cross for a picnic and there was already plenty to carry. We were there for a warm and sensuous afternoon, but when we came back the lock on the door had been drilled and the bag was gone."

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"Good heavens."

"There must be guys who make a business of driving around scenic areas, specifically to look for unattended cars."

"Do you think so?"

Having just said he did, the son didn't respond. He walked around the car toward the fence.

The father said, "Returning to the scene of the crime, eh? Well, your mother would be most disturbed if I came back without that cardigan, it's true. She got eighty percent off it in the sales. One of the great moments of her year so far."

"Are you coming?" the son asked, and the father followed till they stood by the fence. "You going over or through?"

"Over," the father said. "If there's enough slack."

"Let's be having you." The son pressed on the barbed top wire at the midpoint between two posts.

The father said, "Did you know there are hundreds and hundreds of different kinds of barbed wire."

"Are there?"

"People collect them." The father stepped carefully over the fence. "Am I clear?"

"Yeah," the son said.

"I suppose you are going to jump it."

"Not over barbed wire," the son said. "Too much to lose."

"Here, let me."

"I've got it." The son crossed the fence without incident and stood by his father.

"So here we are then," the older man said. "Is the grass greener?"

"Pardon?"

"Is the grass greener?"

"Ah," the son said.

"It isn't actually. Those tufts of woodland grass under the trees are beautiful."

"I suppose you're going to tell me their Latin name," the son said.

The father couldn't remember it. He said, "Not today. So, are we staying here?"

"No, the cross is in the valley. Come on. You'll see it in a minute."

Side by side, they walked through the field. Ahead, in the distance, a long valley flattened into a forest. It was as if they were on the handle of a large, gentle scoop.

"Rems of," the son said.

"Pardon?"

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"It's a cross, rems of."

"Which, translated into English, means?"

"Remains of. The remains of an old stone cross."

"Oh."

"The National Trust owns a country estate up the valley. The cross is on that land, something to do with the history of whoever built and owned the place."

" 'Whoever'?" the father said, despite himself.

After a few moments walking in silence the son stopped and pointed. "There."

Below was a stone structure with a small cross at its peak.

"Good heavens," the father said. "That is impressive. Much bigger than it sounded. When I think of a cross in a field it suggests, say, a military cemetery."

"Got to be a bit more than a piece of wood to get onto an OS map."

"Yes, even so."

The son led down the gentle gradient to the floor of the long valley. There was no real path, but the descent was easy. Halfway down the son waited, but the father was not far behind. The son said, "No, I don't know anything about the history. But I know it's a pretty place on a summer day."

"It is," the father agreed.

Pointing to a lone tree near the bottom of the incline, the son said, "We found some wild strawberries by that tree, old Pam and me."

"Did you?"

"They were tiny. Not much taste. More a symbolic accomplishment than anything else."

"Symbolic of what?"

"Mellow fruitfulness? I don't know."

"You've been here often?"

"Once or twice. But not for years. Certainly not since I moved up the Smoke."

"That *is* years," the father said.

"A long way in more ways than miles."

"So, it's not your personal history of the place that you wanted to . . . share."

"I've got something to say." The son looked at his watch. "A job for you."

"A what?"

"I couldn't talk at the house, so I figured, why not a nice setting."

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"And away from your mother."

"Yes."

"She was deeply offended, you know."

"I don't think so."

"Huh!" the father said. "Frankly, I'm surprised she didn't get in the car and fold her arms and threaten to hold her breath till you invited her."

"Still does that?"

It was a joke. The father nodded but did not smile.

The son said, "I told her I was going to nag you about making a will. She's been nagging me to nag you."

The father was silent for a moment, watching his feet and picking his way around rocks near the bottom of the hillside. "I still haven't done it. I know I should. I even bought a book on wills and probate. But I just haven't been able to mobilise myself."

"No?"

"No."

"Making a will doesn't make anything happen faster."

"I am not superstitious," the father said. "I'm not afraid of the word or the concept 'death.' I did start to read the book."

"And?"

"The essential truth is that drawing up a will is boring and the older I get the harder I find it to do boring things."

The son said, "I can understand that."

"I considered ways to make it more interesting. Specifying that your mother should have my second-best bed, something like that. But in the event, whatever might enliven my will-making would only serve to make her more resentful."

They reached terrain that was more pitted than on the valley side, and in the final yards, both father and son were silent.

The cross was taller than either of them. The son stopped a few yards away but the father advanced and touched the stone and felt the warmth stored up from the sunshine. "So this is the cross," he said.

"Rems of," the son said.

"And you don't know anything about it? Who used it? Anything?"

"Nothing."

"You're a lot of use. What's on the other side?"

"The technical term is 'a hollowed-out bit.' Take a look."

The father did exactly that. From the other side he called, "Good heavens! It's a little amphitheatre, for one person. Maybe somebody

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preached here. Is that what you have in store for me? Some preaching?"

The son laughed aloud and continued to laugh, longer than the father thought was honest. He returned to the boy and said, "Well, wills . . ."

"It's not that."

"What?"

"That I want to talk about. I told Mum that it was, but it isn't."

"So you lied to her."

"Sure."

The father looked down the valley past the cross. He said, "I thought I was getting off too lightly. So what is it, then? Has your mother been getting on at you about my health? She thinks otherwise but I will tell you now what I tell her. I am responsible for my own body and I shall see to myself in my own way."

"Is there something wrong with your health?"

"No, no."

"What?"

"A giddy spell or two. Absolutely nothing, but once she's got the bit between her teeth . . ."

The son looked at his watch.

The father said, "Did you know that back in slavery days sometimes the owners actually fitted slaves with bits in their mouths and drove them? Used them to pull wagons."

"No. I didn't know that."

"People like to think that it was the moral issue that finally got this country to abolish slavery in the colonies, but it wasn't."

"No?"

"We were learning how to build machines. Machines that did things like crush the sugar cane. Machines to replace the slaves. So, in order to sell our machines, we had to abolish slavery."

"Oh."

"So it wasn't about my health?"

"No."

"Her health? Is she all right? Her headaches?"

"No."

"No, no, no! It's always 'no' with you. Can I help you with a car? Will you come into the business? You always react so negatively to me! I thought that adolescent nonsense would pass eventually, but you must be the longest-serving bloody adolescent in human history. We're running out of time, you and me."

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"That's truer than you know," the son said.

"What do you mean by that?" the father said with irritation in his voice from having allowed his feelings to escape into words.

The son seemed to struggle for the right thing to say.

"You're not telling me that you're going to die, are you?" the father said.

"In a way." The boy found a smile. "Yes, I'm going to die."

The father stared. "Die?"

"In a manner of speaking," the son said.

"For God's sake, tell me!"

The son faced his father. "I stole a lot of money."

"You what?"

"A colossal amount of money, actually." The son laughed. "More than I ever dreamed I'd be able to steal, but I did."

"You . . . stole . . . ?"

"Unfortunately, the people I stole it from are people who shouldn't have had it in the first place, know what I mean? And tomorrow, Tuesday at the latest, they will work out what happened."

The father raised a hand and looked around. "I need to sit down," he said. He found some loose stones by the cross.

"Sorry," the son said. "I should have told you to sit down first."

After a moment the father said, "I don't understand. You've stolen money. Can't you give it back?"

"Not and live to the end of the week."

The father looked at his son without speaking.

"So I've decided to die before they kill me," the son said.

"Kill yourself!"

"Not *really!* I'm going to fake it. Not suicide, but my death."

"But . . . how?"

"There's no point in going through the details."

Fighting for understanding, the father said, "What is the point?"

"I would have done it, not involving you, but for two things." And the boy scuffed one shoe with the other.

"What?" the father said weakly.

"It's possible you'll be asked to identify a body," his son said. "And you've got to say it's me. Or at least that you can't tell it isn't."

The father's mouth opened without sound.

"I can't *make* you," the son said. "But if you say it isn't me, then they will find me and kill me. And it will be your responsibility."

You were such a happy child, the father thought.

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The son said, "But more important, I need you to be ready to handle Mum. That's why I've told you. Do you understand?"

His son was waiting for him to speak. He said, "No, I don't. Well, maybe. No, why me? You were always thick as thieves with her when you lived at home."

"It's because we were so close."

The father said, "What you mean is that you are going away and that she, we, will never see you again."

"Or hear from me. Ever."

"No different from dying." The father lowered his head and studied the blades of grass near his feet.

The son said, "And it'll come near to destroying her."

"Don't think it will do the same to me!"

"Not the same way."

"You're my son! And you think—"

"It *won't* affect you the way it will her. That's not criticism or a compliment. But you know it won't. Because you are more in the real world than she is."

"Oh wonderful."

"I had to tell you first so that you would be ready to help her."

"I . . . I feel a bit lightheaded."

"Are you—"

"I'm all right. I'm all right, damn you."

"Put your head down."

"It's all right."

"Between your knees." The son moved to his father and put pressure on the older man's shoulders.

"Get off!" the father said. "Oh no. I don't . . . Here. Come here. Let me hold you." The father held his son by his legs for a long time.

Then the father said, "You're not telling me *first*. You're not going to tell her at all, are you?"

"I can't."

"Bravery always masks cowardice," the father said. "I wonder if the inverse is true. Does your cowardice mask some kind of bravery that I don't understand?"

"Bravery has nothing to do with it," the son said forcefully. "Suppose I told her. She'd never let me leave the house. Or she'd die trying to stop me. You know that. Is that what you want?"

He knew it. It was not what he wanted.

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"So what am I supposed to do? You can say I shouldn't have done what I did. *I* say it was the chance of a lifetime and I had to grab it. But either way it's done. Either way I am 'dead.' It's up to you what kind of dead. It's up to you to do what you can for Mum. Would you rather I didn't tell you at all? Would you rather not know that I *am* alive, somewhere? I may have a new face but I'll be alive and with any luck I'll be enjoying the hell out of the time I have left. Isn't that what you'd want for me? Isn't it?"

"What body?" the father asked.

"What?"

"You said I may have to identify 'your' body."

The son looked at his watch. He said, "There will be a fire. There is a guy who will die no matter what *I* do or don't do. That's the kind of people who are involved. That's all there is to it."

"Oh," the father said.

"We've got to get back."

"You go on," the father said. "I'll make my own way."

"Don't be stupid."

"You *will* have to see her."

"See her but not tell her."

"Leave her to cry her heart out over a son who is, in fact, alive? Not tell her yourself, explain to her and let her cry and find a way to forgive you?"

"I don't have the time," the son said.

"Don't the 'dying' owe that much to those who survive? To make it easier for them, if it's in their power. Isn't that the last responsibility?"

"The cross the still-living have to bear?"

"Rems of." The father looked up at his only child.

The boy stepped back.

The father said, "I will do what I can. Over a dead man's body. For your mother. I will make my will. And see the doctor. Was there anything else? Shall we go back now? Was there anything else?"

Uncomprehending, the son said, "Let's go back."

"Help me up."

The boy helped the older man to his feet. The father was breathing heavily. "I'm cold," he said. They began to walk.

The son said, "I do regret things I've done, Dad."

The father said, "I hope my cardigan's still there." ●

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Readers who have been following David Dean's work since he first appeared in EQMM *in 1990 may have noticed the increasing complexity of his stories. This latest piece resembles a novel in the full cast of characters it employs and the number of story lines it combines. Mr. Dean writes part-time while pursuing a career as a police officer. . . .*

FALLING BOY

by DAVID DEAN

The small, single-engine Cessna thrummed and shuddered as it coursed its way through the autumn night, buffeted occasionally by unseen turbulence. The tired young man in the cockpit was concentrating on the instrument panel, glancing up and out the windscreen only when the monotony became too great and he needed to rest his eyes and ease the tension in his back. He would only allow this for a few moments, aware of the disorientation that would quickly seize any pilot flying in these conditions of poor visibility. With the earth invisible below and no horizon in the distance, spatial delusions, like harpies, hovered beguilingly at the edge of consciousness. With no earth below and no sky above, were you right-side up, or upside down?

Snatches of grey cloud raced by the windows as if torn from the greater whole and flung away. The young man, staring straight ahead now, felt as if he had entered a tunnel, the stratus clouds fleeing the vortex that he was hurtling into.

Little by little, it occurred to him that the wraithlike moisture was not escaping past him in a horizontal plane, he was driving up into it. Naturally, he began to adjust, bringing the nose of his aircraft down. Yet nothing seemed to change, the cloud cover continued to stream downward past him, therefore he must still be ascending!

Beads of sweat formed on his upper lip. It seemed impossible to stop his climb, so he pressed harder against the wheel. Outside, a whining sound began faintly to reach his ears. A small voice said, "Look down. Look down now!"

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With an effort so great he felt his neck muscles creak with strain, he forced himself away from the mesmerizing windscreen and checked his instruments. Airspeed . . . gaining. Horizon indicator . . . horizon indicator! He was nosing over into a dive! Vertical speed was increasing!

With forced control, he eased the wheel back, correcting the plane's attitude and inadvertantly raising his head as he did so. The whining sound had vanished. The night world still rushed past his cockpit. *I was never climbing to begin with,* he thought with a chill.

Down, boy! he commanded himself. Scan the instruments, damn you. There's nothing out there to see, anyway.

But, there was.

Something had flashed, small and white, out to his left, at almost the same attitude. Oh my God, he pleaded, don't let it be another aircraft. I've got enough on my plate now, without playing Dodgem. He could call the nearest airfield and ask if they had it on their radar. He had the right of way here.

It was too late. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw it coming. At right angles to his aircraft, it rushed for him as if in joyous greeting and resolved itself into something coherent. Instinctively, he began to descend, desperately hoping to avoid collision. The instrument panel completely forgotten now, he gaped in horror, white-faced through the tiny window.

It came on, tumbling and falling through the night. He could see it clearly now, little arms and legs thrashing and the plump body spinning. Occasionally the face would flash into view, the eyes seeking him, but then it was spun away. His amazement was so great that he only partially registered the phenomenon of an object falling sideways and not down, and he began unconsciously to wingover to his left. A can of soda began to roll across the floor towards him.

With a soft thud, the boy struck the cockpit and stayed, his face pressed against the glass, his sleepy almond-shaped eyes slowly roaming the interior—"Jesus Christ!" the young pilot screamed. He was incapable of any further action or thought.

Meanwhile, the boy continued his perusal, seemingly oblivious to his plight. His pudgy, short-fingered hands grabbed at the window as his thick lips, curved in a lazy smile, smeared the glass. He appeared fascinated with the instrument panel, gleeful. The pilot couldn't see how he was holding on. He was just there!

At that moment, the boy found the pilot's eyes, cowering in the dark of the cabin, and his heavy, moon-shaped face lit up. He

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pounded on the cabin door with obvious excitement and pointed at the young man, his small mouth working in silence. The pilot saw the door handle begin to turn and lunged for it, feeling the calm, heated air of the cabin already rushing out into the turbulent atmosphere with a gasp; he seized the door and forced it shut again, shouting and cursing incoherently now. When he looked up again the boy was gone.

"Help me! Help me!" he cried aloud as his plane continued its erratic and spiraling descent through the clouds, seeking the earth on its own.

The psychologist sat in the grey cubicle that was his office and awaited his next patient. The day's paper, its headlines screaming of fresh horrors, lay halfheartedly folded next to his chair. Murders, rapes, and kidnappings heralded each day in a fresh parade. How many of the perpetrators of these atrocities, he pondered, had sat across from him in his tiny office over the years?

Were they insane at the time of the act, or did they understand the difference between right and wrong? That was all the court wished to know. Distressingly, the majority had been perfectly lucid when they killed or tortured.

He sighed aloud at the memory of fifteen-year-old murderers, parents who had smothered their infants, and old women who poisoned their decrepit lodgers for their social security checks. He no longer found humor in *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

As he attempted to clean his thick glasses with an old and not-so-clean handkerchief, he admitted to himself some interest in this new referral nonetheless. Here was something different and unbloodied. Possibly a true psychological puzzle.

He had been requested by a local FAA official to do a workup on the young man waiting in his reception area, with the understanding that the patient would pick up the expense. The FAA was simply affording the young man the opportunity to clear himself and regain his aviation license, which had been temporarily suspended pending investigation.

Absently brushing some dandruff from his shoulder, the psychologist flipped through the reports that had been made available to him. The papers gave the young pilot's name as Ernest Thorvald, white male, twenty-four years of age, a college graduate, and a pilot for six years. Urinalysis and blood samples taken within hours of his "incident" had shown no traces of narcotics or alcohol use. A full

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and lengthy physical conducted over several days had shown him to be free of any disease or organic problems that might affect his judgment or performance. That left the mind. That shrouded and shifting landscape that resisted microscopes and X-rays, yet affected its host far more profoundly than any physical stimuli.

The psychologist leaned forward and spoke into his desk intercom and then quickly stubbed out his cigarette, fanning the smoke with his small hands as he did so. As a final concession to the patient's comfort, he tilted his overflowing ashtray into the wastebasket next to his desk, spilling several butts onto the floor for his efforts. He looked up to see the young man standing nervously in his doorway.

Thorvald was tall and slender and stood with an athlete's easy grace, in spite of his fidgeting. The little man behind the desk could clearly see that he was troubled. His plain, youthful face was pale, the cheeks hollowed. The eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, a painful suffering evident in their nervous travels. A poster boy for college recruitment in his better days, the psychologist thought with a little subjective envy. He himself had graduated college at seventeen and been derided for his small stature, dark complexion, and love of opera. A nerd. Yet now he must help someone who years ago, had they been contemporaries, would probably have made him the butt of cruel dormitory humor.

He pushed his plump body away from his cluttered desk and stood to his full five-foot, five-inch height and indicated the chair opposite. Apprehensively, Thorvald folded himself into the proffered seat. He felt like a high-schooler summoned to the principal's office. The small man across from him intimidated him in spite of his size. He had glimpsed the nameplate on the desk and was not comforted by his foreign-sounding name, Anthony Valerian. Plus, he stank of cigarette smoke, the whole room did, and his clothes looked as if they had never seen an iron. This is a psychologist, he thought angrily. This weirdo is supposed to help me?

Valerian said nothing for a few moments, watching the workings of Thorvald's face. Subtle, he's not, Valerian mused. Clearly, he does not want to be here. And yet there is a certain sensitivity to his face. Maybe not just a jock.

"So, Mr. Thorvald, you've had a problem recently," he began without preamble. He often found going straight at a problem the best method; he eschewed smarmy introductions and reassurances. Most patients were too intelligent or neurotic to be lulled by them in any case. He also knew, from long experience, that there was no

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immediate need for them to like the man who was probing into their thoughts and feelings. Trust and confidence were things that he would have to earn along the way.

Thorvald pulled himself upright in his chair and clasped his hands tightly together. "Yes, I guess so—a problem."

Valerian said nothing. The silence went on into the uncomfortable zone.

"An unauthorized landing," Thorvald quietly resumed. "On a closed airfield," he clarified with just a touch of indignation creeping in. The silence returned.

"Is that bad?" Valerian asked evenly.

Thorvald looked directly at him now, trying to assess whether this earthbound gnome was pulling his leg or really did not appreciate the gravity of his violation and its subsequent consequences. He couldn't decide, so he answered in what he hoped were the same bland tones.

"Yes, it's bad. I'm looking at permanent revocation of my aviator's license. I think that's pretty damn bad," he finished on a rising note. Control yourself, he thought.

"Why is it bad?" Valerian asked with exasperating naivete.

"What?" exploded out of Thorvald before he could call it back. Was this guy a simpleton, or what? "It's my living. I need that license in order to fly airplanes, which happens to be how I make my living. I would have thought that would be obvious, even to a non-flyer!" He threw in the last for good measure.

"No, no, Mr. Thorvald. You misunderstand me. Why is an unauthorized landing on an abandoned airfield a bad thing? What's the harm?"

Now Thorvald felt like a jerk. He was reacting like a self-centered child. "It's dangerous. Not only to the pilot and his crew and passengers—though I was flying alone at the time—but also to other aircraft in the area. You see, you're supposed to stick with a flight plan and observe certain air traffic control rules along the way."

Valerian could see that he was warming to his subject and nodded to encourage him to go on.

"When you enter an air traffic control zone, they give you altitude and air-speed instructions in order to lessen the chance of midair collisions. They watch the big picture on radar and know better than you could what's out there." He couldn't tell if the little man was understanding him or not. He felt like a grade-school teacher with a bored class.

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"So, when you suddenly go sliding off-screen with no explanation, they've got to scramble. They've got to get any other aircraft out of the area, because they don't know what you're doing or where you're going.

"As far as landing at a closed airfield, well, anything or anyone could've been on that strip. I could've plowed into an old fuel truck or a carload of kids sitting out there drinking beer. As it turned out, I got lucky. It's an airfield that hasn't been closed long and was in pretty good shape. What's even luckier is that I'd flown that field before, a number of times actually, and remembered the layout real well. Which was good, because it was darker than hell out there." He finished quietly, rubbing his eyelids with his fingertips as if to massage away the memories of that night.

Well, thought Valerian, very good. He's not in denial of the event, at least. He seems to accept responsibility for his actions. That's a lot more than I usually get the first time out. This might not be so hard. Now for why.

"Um, yes, I see, I guess you were lucky, then." He paused. Thorvald knew what was coming and was preparing himself, beginning to tense around the mouth. "What made it necessary to change your flight plan, Mr. Thorvald?"

Thorvald was looking away now, the classic body language of the liar. After a moment, he turned and faced Valerian, looking him directly in the eyes for the first time. *Here we go, his first lie.* Valerian groaned inwardly.

"I just blacked out, I guess." Thorvald's gaze slid away to his left. Like a dog, Valerian thought.

"Have you ever experienced such a thing before?" The psychologist already knew he hadn't, having read his medical history.

"No, not that I remember."

"Never in school? Or when you were a child?" Valerian persisted.

"No, never," Thorvald answered more firmly.

"Perhaps your parents might remember. Your mother. Would you mind if I called her?" It could be very risky bringing up a patient's parents. However, Thorvald was not here for long-term therapy, only an evaluation, and Valerian didn't have time for such niceties.

"No! I mean, yes! I would mind. I'm telling you I've never had a blackout!"

Valerian guessed that he had told his mother the truth. They often did.

"Exactly, Mr. Thorvald. You have never experienced blackouts."

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Thorvald felt cornered, confused. Was this guy calling him a liar or agreeing with him?

"Mr. Thorvald, blackouts, if they are not organic in nature, and your medical records show no sign of this, are usually brought about as a result of great stress. Now, given that you are an experienced pilot and were piloting an aircraft that according to your instructor's evaluations you were very comfortable with, and the weather conditions were challenging but not overly demanding of someone of your experience and training, where was the stress? This episode—was it prior to the flight or during?"

"Episode?" Thorvald spluttered, leaning forward, then back, then forward again. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Event, Mr. Thorvald. The event that brought about your blackout." The pilot glanced up suspiciously at his heavy emphasis. "As you have pointed out, you have no history of blackouts and for the moment that rules out a long-standing psychosis, which leaves us with the present, or at least, the very recent past.

"Understand that the details of our conversation will remain confidential! The only issue the FAA board is concerned with is your fitness to fly again. Something you wish for as well, I think. Naturally, you must be forthcoming or my report will simply read, 'No conclusions possible.' Whenever you are ready, Mr. Thorvald."

You cagey little bastard, Thorvald thought. You've got me. With a deep, slow exhalation, he began.

When he finished, dry-mouthed and exhausted, nothing happened. No white-coated attendants rushed in to bind him. The little man, Valerian, remained hunched over in his chair staring at the desk top, either lost in thought or totally uninterested. During the telling of his fantastic and, even to himself, unbelievable story, Valerian had shown no reaction. Only occasionally, he would jot something down on a piece of scrap paper and then return to his reverie.

Outside, in the hallway, two people walked by the closed door of the office in subdued conversation. One of them laughed softly at some shared joke. Valerian looked up.

"Did anything strike you as unusual about the boy?" he asked softly.

Thorvald stared at him for a moment, trying to grasp his meaning. "You mean besides the fact that he was clinging to the outside of my plane as I was racing home in a storm?" He laughed aloud at the absurdity of the question. "I thought that was unusual enough

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at the time!" He couldn't stop laughing now. The tension was gushing from him in gales.

"What I mean," Valerian continued unperturbed, "is that you actually gave a very good description of the boy. Forget for a moment the circumstances. What impression did he make on you?"

Thorvald's laughter began to subside little by little. He focused on the memory of the face pressed against the rain-drenched windscreen. Yes, there was something. The drooling smile, the thick-lidded, oddly shaped eyes.

"I think," he began hesitantly, "I think he may have been retarded or something."

"Yes," Valerian murmured. "Perhaps he was." He continued to stare thoughtfully at Thorvald. "Mr. Thorvald, do you know this boy?"

For reasons he could not understand, this question alarmed him terribly. He felt anxiety, like ants, crawling and running over his body. "Know him? How could I know him? He's not real! Even I know that! And if you don't, chief, maybe you and I should switch seats."

Valerian leaned sideways and reached for something on the floor, grunting with the effort. When he came up, he had a wad of newspapers clutched in his hand and began to smooth them out on his desk. He spun one of the newspapers around and pushed it in front of Thorvald. His finger rested on a grainy photo of a boy about ten years of age. "Do you know this boy?" Valerian asked him.

Thorvald didn't answer; he slumped forward in his seat, unconscious, his face pressed against that of the boy in the picture.

Valerian spoke quietly into the pay phone in the diner, not wishing to be overheard. "I believe I have a young man who may be of some help in the Edison kidnapping." He waited for a reply from Captain Masterson of the prosecutor's office before continuing. Masterson and he had been thrown together a number of times over the years and had achieved something of a relationship. He knew what Masterson would ask next.

"Anthony, is this young man a patient of yours?"

Valerian understood the implications of the question immediately and had anticipated Masterson's concern. If a trial resulted from information obtained through the therapy, the defense would seize on the ethical violation of patient confidentiality and the whole case would be torpedoed. But there was a young boy missing. A boy

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with a serious handicap. How long would his captors tolerate the demands this put on them? Or had they planned to tolerate them at all? The clock was ticking.

"Yes," he answered. "He is a patient, a referral for evaluation, actually, but he has expressed a willingness to meet with you. Naturally, I do not intend to reveal what was said in our session. I'm not sure it would be of help, in any case."

There was a significant pause. "Then what can he do for us?"

"I'm not sure."

"Anthony." Masterson's impatience was beginning to show. "Is he a suspect?"

"Again, I'm not sure," Valerian answered truthfully.

Masterson had agreed to the meeting nonetheless, acknowledging inwardly that they had precious little to go on in this case and hadn't the luxury to be choosy. A difficult and sometimes capricious retarded boy had been kidnapped from a prominent local couple. The heir apparent to an aviation empire started by his father, dead now for several years.

His mother, a society girl from old and dwindling money, had married new money in the person of Franklin Edison, thirty years her senior. Brilliant but grasping, bullying, and crude, he had amassed a considerable fortune in his time, saving marriage for his old age. He had sired but one offspring, hopefully christened "Thomas."

Now Thomas was gone. Taken without apparent force from his own bedroom. That in itself was puzzling. Tommy was known to be a handful when angered or frightened. It was hard to picture him going quietly. Of course, they, whoever "they" were, could have been prepared. Ether, gags, and even suffocation could not be ruled out. Even so, it was hard to accept. The bed was hardly mussed. It was as if he had simply risen in the night and floated out his open window. No telltale ladder had been left behind in this kidnapping. His mother claimed the window had been closed when she had last looked in on him.

Had it not been for the computer-generated note left on the bed, there would have been doubts about an abduction at all. The note itself was useless. It might as well have been beamed down from Mars. It was virtually impossible to narrow down its source to any computer or printer, and naturally there were no fingerprints.

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The note had simply read, "We have taken the boy. You will hear from us." No demands, rules, or threats. Just a conspicuous "us." Masterson wondered about that. Intended to mislead, or an inadvertent slip?

That was three days ago and there had been no follow-up as of yet. There had been dozens of letters from various psychos and psychics, all claiming revealed knowledge or involvement, and even a bogus ransom note demanding a cool million in cash. All had been easily run down, including the high-school gang that had demanded the money, but none had furthered the investigation one iota.

Not that there weren't suspects. Masterson had two. The mother, Catherine, and her second husband, Roger Scrope. Obvious, really, but not a shred of evidence to connect them with the crime. They had opportunity, means, and motive. A powerful motive, in Masterson's experience. Gain.

Only Tommy stood between them and Edison's aviation empire. In a move typical of the irascible Edison, he had left his retarded son his entire estate. His pining young wife became de facto regent for the young heir but stood to gain nothing directly as long as he lived. Masterson had learned through the rumor mill that this was possibly due to various indiscretions committed by the youthful bride. Especially with Edison's senior executive, Roger Scrope.

Tellingly, the widow was married to the ambitious Scrope just a year later. There was something positively medieval about the whole arrangement, and now the heir apparent had vanished like Richard the Third's princely nephews, leaving the kingdom up for grabs. Masterson had no doubt that once Tommy was found dead, or was legally declared so, the courts would settle the fortune on the mother and, indirectly, on her slightly sinister husband.

Yet, Masterson admitted, this was all speculation. Masterson had met and interviewed both of the Scropes extensively and each had provided the other with an alibi. They were asleep in the same bed the night of the abduction. They had heard nothing and seen nothing and slept through the night undisturbed.

More than that, Masterson doubted that Catherine could have participated in such a scheme. In spite of her reserved, brittle manner, it was obvious that she was racked with grief and terror for her son. It had not escaped Masterson that during Tommy's young life, she had never attempted to hide him in spite of the embarrassment his condition must have created among her society friends.

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She had often been seen in his company at air shows and local events.

There was one troubling point in her vouchsafing of Scrope, however. She admitted that since her remarriage she slept very soundly and often relied on her husband to wake her when Tommy called for her in the night.

Even so, it was difficult to believe that Scrope could lure the volatile Tommy away in the dead of night. It was well attested that Tommy had little liking for his stepfather, often having tantrums and other less pleasant episodes when forced to be in his company. In fact, when the family had to travel, mother and son traveled separately from the husband, in order to avoid these displays.

Masterson's next step would be to place the couple on the polygraph but he dreaded to do so. In the public's eye it would cast them as prime suspects and the press would make the most of it. The result would be a political firestorm that the prosecutor's office was ill-equipped to weather, especially if they came off clean. They were, after all, extremely powerful citizens and there was no evidence that they were anything but grieving victims.

The office phone rang. It was the receptionist announcing that Captain Masterson's appointments were waiting in the interview room. Masterson hung up, straightened her pantyhose, and walked dispiritedly down the corridor to meet them.

Thorvald sat up quickly from his slouch and felt his face coloring when Masterson introduced herself. It had never occurred to him that "Captain" Masterson would be a female. Especially an attractive, if older one. She must be in her late thirties, he figured, judging by the worry lines around her eyes. Her legs, however, were those of a schoolgirl, long and shapely. She must take pride in them, he thought, as the skirt of her rather severe business suit was just a tad shorter than it needed to be. He was embarrassed by his own reaction, in spite of himself, and relieved that she seemed to take no notice.

Valerian had simply nodded in greeting and returned to studying the top of the table at which they were all seated. Thorvald thought he seemed uncomfortable, as if he were the one in the hot seat. Inwardly, he rued agreeing to meet with Masterson and couldn't imagine what he had to offer her investigation.

"Well, Mr. Thorvald," Masterson opened. "I understand that you have some information about the Edison kidnapping that might be of use to us. Is that so?"

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Thorvald looked up at her cool, appraising eyes and began to flush again. "Well, um, you see, I had this . . ." He glanced desperately at Valerian, who was now engrossed in studying his shoes. "I was flying back from Memphis when . . . oh hell! I don't know! I saw something and the good shrink here thinks it might mean something. I really don't know what you two expect from me. I was tired. It was raining.

"You tell me!" He pointed at Valerian. "You're the head doctor!"

Masterson's gaze shifted to Valerian. "Anthony? Care to enlighten me a little?"

Valerian roused himself and turned in his chair like a schoolboy facing his teacher. His small hands were clasped together on the tabletop. "It seems Mr. Thorvald had an hallucination, I needn't go into the details of it, that featured the missing boy. What struck me as potentially important about it was that during the experience, and for several days after, he did not recognize the boy as someone he knew. Someone he had been in contact with on many occasions. Memorable occasions, I would think. In fact, a very memorable boy.

"It came out during our session that Mr. Thorvald was employed by the boy's family as a pilot and often flew the mother and child on their trips and escorted them about once they arrived. He is one of the few adult males that the boy appeared to take a genuine liking to. His being a pilot no doubt helped in this, the boy being enamored of planes and flying in general."

Valerian paused, letting the facts sink in. "The night Mr. Thorvald was flying and experienced his 'episode' was the same night the Edison boy was abducted."

Now there was a very long pause. Masterson blinked. "Yes, I see . . . I think. You're insinuating that Mr. Thorvald had some inside knowledge of the abduction plans?"

"Wait a minute! I don't know—" Thorvald started, the color draining from his face.

"No," Valerian interrupted. "I don't mean that, exactly. I believe that Mr. Thorvald, subconsciously, perhaps, may possess some insight into the situation that could be useful in your inquiries." He finished without looking up at either of them.

Masterson stared at him for a while as silence settled on the room. She was unsure of the little man's reasoning, yet based on their past associations, wanted to trust him. To what end, she didn't know. If Valerian thought Thorvald was involved, then he was treading thin ice professionally, but she could have that checked out easily

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enough. Thorvald was in the air the night it happened and undoubtedly would be remembered by airport personnel. His unauthorized landing had made a minor stir, which only served to clinch his alibi.

But what about the hallucination? Was Valerian hinting at a guilty conscience? She could have her office confirm Thorvald's movements, but what was she to do with him in the meantime? Being an investigator, she hated vagueness.

"Anthony, I'm at a loss here. What exactly is it that you want me to do?"

For the first time during their meeting he turned and faced her directly. "I'd like to suggest that we visit Mr. and Mrs. Scrope at their home." He paused a beat. "All of us."

Masterson glanced over to Thorvald, who looked as if he wished he was anywhere but there. "Would that be agreeable to you, Mr. Thorvald?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess," he answered reluctantly. "Though I still don't see what you people want from me."

"No," she concurred. "I'm not too sure myself." She glanced significantly at Valerian. "However, I don't see what harm could come of a little visit."

She rose from her chair. "Shall we?"

The Edison estate was a rambling, mock-medieval affair built of grey stone and occupying sprawling, well-tended grounds. Though charming at a distance, at close quarters it presented a rather somber facade, inadvertently achieving an effect shared with its genuine counterparts in Europe. The steep, slated roof gave it a brooding, secretive countenance that Masterson felt matched its new occupant, the usurper Scrope, very well. As she brought the car to a crunching halt in the smoothly raked drive, she thought that at least this would be interesting. The lack of movement in this case had made her restless and combative.

They were greeted at the door by Yolanda, a pretty German au pair whom Masterson had met previously. Too pretty, Masterson thought. Either Catherine was very confident or Scrope was used to getting his way. As a woman, she didn't like the looks of it.

"Gut afternoon, Captain." She smiled through her thick accent. "Haben ze an appointment?"

"Nein, fräulein," Masterson replied breezily. She knew the girl could speak English perfectly when she wanted to. "Haben ze badge.

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Now run and fetch your master and mistress. It's a little cool to be kept waiting on the stoop."

Yolanda hesitated, annoyance beginning to cloud her smooth face, then thought better of it and ushered them in. Without another word, or taking their coats, she turned pertly on her heel and walked briskly down the hallway, her tight skirt clearly delineating the movements beneath. Masterson turned to the two men with her and noted, with some annoyance, that both had come to attention in the presence of the lovely Yolanda and were raptly following her sinuous exit.

"Anthony," she snapped. "You might want to take a handkerchief to that drool on your chin."

He actually began to dig in his rear pocket and caught himself. Blushing, he turned to study some eminently forgettable artwork hanging nearby.

"Men are so easy," she murmured aloud.

Scrope startled them all, appearing suddenly and hailing Masterson too loudly. "Bridgid!" he called out. He had made a point of finding out her first name shortly after their initial meeting. "Come in, come in." He was waving them into his office/study. He breathed good whiskey on her as he forced her to squeeze past him in the doorway. He stepped aside for the men. She thought she detected a puzzled, worried look on his face as he took them in.

"Ernest," he greeted the young man. "What brings you here? She hasn't got you under arrest, has she?" Masterson thought he sounded almost hopeful.

"No, sir," he began nervously. "They seem to think—"

Masterson smoothly cut him off. "We think, since Mr. Thorvald knew, um, knows Tommy so well and spent a good deal of time with him, that maybe he can help us. Point out something we might have missed." Sounds good, she thought.

"And who's this?" Scrope asked, nodding at Valerian.

"This is Mr. Anthony Valerian, a professional colleague of mine. I asked him to assist me," she lied.

As they took seats in the overstuffed armchairs of the study, Masterson asked after Mrs. Scrope. Roger was still eyeing the other two men, a bit uneasily, she thought.

"Eh? Mrs. . . . Catherine? Much as you'd think. She's taking it damn hard. Lying down now, I expect. The doctor's got her on some pretty strong sedatives. Her only child, you know," he added by way of explanation to the men present.

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As if it would be any different if she had a dozen, thought Masterson. This reptile doesn't have an ounce of feeling for the missing boy or his suffering mother. She also mentally noted that he had yet to ask about the progress of the investigation. Most victims didn't let you get through the doorway before they asked.

Scrope returned his attention to her. "You don't need to question her anymore, do you?"

"I would like to talk to her, yes."

"Listen, Bridgid, we've done all we can to cooperate, now what I'd like to see—"

He didn't get to finish because at that moment his wife stumbled into the room. "Any news, Ms. Masterson? Have you found him?"

Masterson was shocked. Just three days before Mrs. Scrope had still worn the facade of class and wealth. Not so now. The deterioration was marked. Her hair was ludicrously askew, all the more so because it retained the phantom of its former coiffure. Her face, naked of makeup, was ashen and dry, revealing a woman who was plain, bordering on ugly. The eyes were sunken and dark, whites showing all around. Masterson hardly recognized her. She leaned against an end table for support, wobbling as she clutched a damp handkerchief to her chest.

She seemed slowly to comprehend the effect she had created and made a visible effort to compose herself. Masterson caught Scrope looking at his wife with obvious distaste. The woman's eyes sought Masterson's and managed to hold. "My baby?" she pleaded.

Masterson was on her feet and guiding the wretched woman to a chair. "No news yet, Mrs. Scrope. We just stopped by to follow up on a few things. I know it's a bad time, but really, time is our enemy in situations like these. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, her voice hoarse and faint. "I do."

"Mrs. Scrope, you remember Ernest Thorvald, of course." Masterson nodded in the direction of the uneasy young pilot.

The other woman turned in his direction, puzzlement, then delight rippling across her features. "Ernest!" she cried. "I'm so glad you've come. Tommy was always so glad to see you. It's so thoughtful of you to come by."

Thorvald was virtually squirming with discomfort, his sense of participating in a subterfuge causing a blush to climb his cheeks. He managed to stammer, "The captain, that is Ms. Masterson, thought I should . . . well, since I know Tommy, that maybe I could help . . . or something," he finished lamely.

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Tommy's mother took no notice. "Yes! Yes, of course! That's very clever of the captain."

It was Masterson's turn to blush. She glanced at Valerian, who continued silently to study the Scropes.

Mrs. Scrope rushed on, "You know Tommy as well as anyone. He admired you so much!" She had risen unsteadily from her chair, her eyes bright with excitement. "You talked about boy things with him, didn't you? When I was dozing on our trips? I'm sure I heard you, though I tried not to eavesdrop."

Everyone present was frozen with embarrassment, knowing that such a conversation with Tommy was highly unlikely.

"Catherine, you'd best go lie down," Scrope barked. "I'll send Yolanda round."

She plowed on. "Tommy would confide in you, wouldn't he? About boy things. About hiding places and such?" Tears of hope had begun to slide down her drawn cheeks. She turned toward the doorway, as if to begin the search immediately, her movements now charged with energy. Yolanda had appeared, blocking her path, looking composed and capable, her former perkiness gone as if it had never existed.

Scrope struggled to his feet and shouted, "That's enough!" He spun on Masterson. "You happy now? You people clear out of here! Thorvald, you come see me first thing in the morning at the office," he added ominously.

"Roger, no!" Catherine wailed. "They've come to help, don't you see? They've brought Ernest along. He'll know where Tommy's hiding! He'll find him!"

"Like hell he will," Scrope growled. "He can't find the goddamn airport, for Christ's sake!"

Thorvald sprang to his feet, fists clenched. "You son of a bitch."

Masterson stepped between them and placed one hand on Thorvald's chest. With the other she gently encircled his thumb, preparing for a straight-wrist take-down. If the one hand didn't work, she was prepared to use the other.

"Take it easy. That's enough now," she murmured, looking directly into Thorvald's eyes. It took a moment for the pressure against her palm to relax and she watched as the pupils began to contract. She knew then he would be okay. She disentangled her hand. "Come on, maybe we'd better get out of here."

"Perhaps first we could take a look at his bedroom?" It was Valerian, who had remained silent throughout and was even now

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seated, hands folded in his lap, looking small and myopic. He had directed his question to Mrs. Scrope.

"Oh yes," she breathed. "Please, let's look."

Scrope fixed his gaze on Valerian for the first time, his face clearly registering his contempt. "And who the hell are you?"

"Mr. Scrope," Masterson interceded smoothly, "maybe it wouldn't hurt for us to have another look in the boy's room. After all, Thorvald just might notice something we've missed. He did spend quite a bit of time with the boy.

"And I think it would calm your wife to see us making some kind of effort, don't you think?" she added quietly.

He looked as if he thought nothing of the kind, and was about to say so, but his wife had seized Valerian and was escorting him towards the hall. The unhappy Thorvald trailed morosely behind like a forgotten chaperone. Yolanda was left sulking.

"Well, I'll be damned," Scrope muttered. "It seems it doesn't matter what I think. You run along with your little friends now, Bridgid, and have your look. But I just hope it's been worth it to you 'cause I'm gonna have your job over this. You've gotten nowhere with this investigation and now you're grasping at straws."

"I don't think you'd want it," she replied evenly. "The job. You have to deal with too many people like yourself. It can be very unpleasant and not a little depressing." With that she smiled, turned on her heel, and went to join the others, wondering how she was going to explain her actions to the prosecutor. She prayed Valerian knew what he was doing.

She found the room much as she remembered it, large and oblong, with leaded windows overlooking an ill-kept garden. Only now the bed was made and the windows closed. She noted a trace of fingerprint powder on the sill and thought how difficult the damn stuff was to get rid of.

Every conceivable surface was cluttered with the objects of Tommy's great, if limited, passion. Airplanes. Toy planes clustered on every shelf and nightstand. Paintings and photographs lined the walls. Picture books of aircraft spilled from his bookshelves and desk. Even his quilt was stitched with them and the curtains framing his windows were an airplane print. Finally, in a crowning achievement, dozens of scale models dangled by invisible wires, festooning the very air in Tommy's room.

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Tommy had made no distinction between the civil and the military, but suspended them all in the crowded skies above his bed. Everything from the Wright Brothers' first effort to the space shuttle was represented. To complete the effect, the ceiling was painted a sky-blue and laced with puffy white clouds.

At the far end of the room, Catherine Scrope was chatting loudly and gaily to Valerian, her plumpish and distracted escort, pointing out each model as evidence of her Tommy's incipient, if undiscovered, intelligence. Masterson smiled as Valerian dutifully nodded. Catherine could not have been more delighted at his responses. For the moment she was happy again, playing hostess to this odd assortment of visitors who seemed to care about her boy. For the moment Tommy's room was a source of joy and pride to her and the terrors of its vacancy were held at bay.

Thorvald had been forgotten for the moment and was left standing over the missing boy's bed. Upon seeing Masterson, he glanced furtively in the direction of Mrs. Scrope and her owlish partner and then hissed under his breath, "Great goin', Captain. Just great! Now, I'm not only suspended, I'm unemployed as well."

He certainly hasn't benefited from his relationship with Valerian and me, Masterson thought grimly, and began to ponder what strings she could pull to help him out. But Thorvald wasn't finished.

"I want out of here. There's nothing we can do to help this poor woman. In fact, we've probably done more harm than good by coming here. She thinks Tommy and I shared some kind of secrets! I could hardly understand him when he talked, which wasn't very damn much. Mostly he just showed me his newest models when I'd come around to pick up him and his mom. Sometimes he'd even punch me when she wasn't looking."

Masterson couldn't hide her smile. Thorvald sounded just like an aggrieved older brother complaining of a roughneck younger sibling. She wondered if he knew that combative behavior was sometimes an expression of love. At least, when she thought about her own boys, she certainly hoped so. It wasn't hard to see why Tommy might have loved this young man. Especially when you considered Scrope as the alternative.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Valerian waving them over.

"Mr. Thorvald," Valerian began. "Perhaps you could tell us which of these aircraft"—he waved vaguely at the ceiling—"would have been Tommy's favorite?"

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Catherine Scrope smiled confidently at the young man, obviously sure that he would have the answer. Thorvald hardly missed a beat.

"The B-seventeen. Definitely. He was always wanting me to unhook it from the ceiling so he could show it to me. He had it hanging right over his bed." He pointed helpfully at the ceiling but a filament with nothing on the end twisted slowly in the air currents of the room like an unbaited fishing line. Thorvald's gaze darted from plane to plane, always coming back to the empty line. "I'm sure it was here. He especially liked that one because his dad, Mr. Edison, had one in mothballs stored out at the old . . ." Thorvald's face went slack for a moment and he seemed to lose his train of thought. "The old airfield. The one I landed at that night."

"I see," Valerian replied. "Maybe we should take a ride out there?"

It took several minutes for Masterson to realize that she was looking at a crime scene. Once she had placed it together in her mind, replayed it for discrepancies and continuity, she believed she knew what had happened here.

Standing next to her in the dimly lit interior of the old bomber's fuselage, Thorvald thought he heard a sharp intake of breath and glanced fearfully at the woman next to him. She continued to stare down into the plastic bowl that projected from the plane's underside. The belly-gunner's turret.

In his hand he held the severed end of a length of hose that snaked its way into the turret and ended in an ancient, high-altitude oxygen mask, its deflated, insectlike face staring emptily back at them like the discarded carapace of some giant species of locust. It shifted a little, as if it had a life of its own, animated by the inadvertent movement of his arm. As it did so, it crept forward, partially covering the crushed remains of a plastic miniature of the aircraft whose belly they stood in. It reminded him of an octopus settling over a wounded fish.

Masterson looked at Thorvald, who had visibly paled at finding these traces of the missing boy's passage. He was swaying and she thought he might faint.

She reached over and gently removed the tubing from his grasp and spoke in a whisper. "Let's step out of here now. Try not to touch anything else on your way out."

He numbly obeyed and led the way to the ladder.

* * *

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It had taken less than twenty minutes to drive to the airfield from the Scrope home. The lock on the double-gated, chain-link fence had yielded easily to the key reluctantly supplied by Scrope himself. Masterson was sure he had been on the verge of demanding she produce a search warrant when some warning device went off in his head, reminding him that victims, innocent victims, do not obstruct the police in a search for their children. Even stepchildren. Masterson had greatly enjoyed the alarmed expression on Scrope's face when she announced their intention to visit the airfield.

On their way out the door, almost as an afterthought, she asked Scrope who else had keys to the airfield. "The caretaker," he spat. "Among others. How the hell should I know?"

Catherine had cheerfully corrected him. "Oh no, Roger," she chirped, her mood buoyed with hope. "You dismissed him several weeks ago, don't you remember? And then changed the locks in case he tried to come back and damage anything. There's no one on the grounds anymore. You're the only one with keys, dear."

Scrope's face was ashen as Masterson eased the door closed.

On the drive over, Masterson made several calls from her car phone as she let Thorvald drive the route he knew so well. The first whispered, cryptic conversation was with her sergeant, whom she had given the task of verifying Thorvald's alibi prior to leaving the office.

It was much as she'd thought. Assisting officers of the Nashville P.D. had confirmed his filing of a flight plan during the time in question and several of the airport's female employees remembered his face from the grainy, black and white photo published in the local paper—an embarrassing commemoration of his inexplicable change of landing sites.

The second call was to the detective she had assigned to keep the Scrope home under surveillance. "If he leaves the house, follow him—discreetly. Don't put a stop on him unless I say so. Anything unusual, call me. Anything."

She hung up and glanced back uneasily at Valerian and Catherine Scrope in the rear seat. She needn't have worried about being overheard. Catherine was chatting with the taciturn Valerian like a schoolgirl on her first double date, undeterred by her escort's lack of social skills. Masterson couldn't help but smile at the unlikely pairing.

* * *

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The corrugated metal doors of the antiquated aircraft hangar had presented more of a problem than the gates. The lock had yielded easily enough, but it had taken Thorvald several moments to get the heavy doors to separate and roll open on their rusty, dented tracks.

The cavernous interior was gloomy and echoed slightly with their steps on the cracked concrete flooring. Above, a weak, greenish daylight filtered in through tinted fiberglass, giving everything a murky, underwater look.

The great warbird bristled with armament—a mechanical revenant of an era of heroes and just causes. Twin guns thrust forward defiantly from turrets located at its belly, top, and tail. An additional two were mounted at the front in stationary positions. Masterson glanced quizzically at Thorvald.

"All the firing pins and bolts have been removed," he offered.

Behind them Catherine Scrope called out, "Tommy?" She took a few halting steps toward the ancient World War II bomber, but Masterson, suddenly afraid of what she might find inside, forestalled her.

She took Catherine gently by the elbow. "Why don't you wait with Mr. Valerian while I take a look around? All right? It won't take but a moment."

"The gunner's turrets were Tommy's favorite," Thorvald said when Valerian had taken Catherine's hand and led her out into the sun. "He liked them so much that his dad, Mr. Edison, had their motors hooked up to the power in the hangar."

Masterson gave no sign of having heard him. Her face was pressed to the gunner's port beneath the plane.

"So now you can operate them. That was Tommy's favorite thing. He would sit inside for hours with an old oxygen mask on and spin the turret around. All you've got to do is press on the foot pedals." He finished awkwardly, oppressed by the silence that surrounded them.

Masterson turned toward him, a smudge of dust on her cheek. "There's something in there. Can we get inside?"

It was debris, obscure and dimly seen through the scratched and scarred plastic of the belly-gunner's turret, that drew them into the fuselage. Inside, threading their way cautiously through a hanging garden of wires and cracked tubing, they were greeted by the smell of old leather and moldering canvas.

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Peering into the belly turret with the aid of her penlight, Masterson could now make out clearly what she had noticed from outside. Evidence that Tommy had been here. Over her shoulder, she heard Thorvald murmur, "That's Tommy's model."

But it was the high-altitude mask that had her attention. One of the straps that secured it to the wearer's face was broken, recently if she was any judge. The rubber tubing that led from the mouthpiece snaked its way up and out of the turret. She followed its course with the light, turning to her left. It ended, severed, within a few feet of a fire extinguisher mounted to the inner wall of the aircraft. The remaining half dangled from the ceiling.

On hands and knees, she crept to the extinguisher, playing the light across its metal surface. "CO_2," she whispered. She noted the splayed end of the oxygen tube and compared it to the slightly flared nozzle of the extinguisher. A hot anger began to flush her cheeks. She knew what had been done here.

She walked back to the turret and stared down, an ugly picture forming in her mind. She saw a young boy, seated and strapped into the gunner's harness, high-altitude mask in place for added realism, grasping the handles of the neutered .50 cals., ready for action. She saw him pressing furiously on the control pedals, spinning first this way, then that, to counter the enemy threat, busily blasting away at a sky swarming with enemy fighters. Oblivious to any distractions but the mission at hand. A happy and excited boy.

A boy awakened in the middle of the night and promised an unexpected treat. An adventure. A trip to the old airfield and its wonderful bomber. She saw the bargain of his cooperation and silence sealed with the treasured model that spun lazily over his bed. Always just beyond his reach.

She also saw a man. A man smiling down at the tiny warrior happily ensconced in the gunner's turret beneath him. She saw him unstrap a fire extinguisher from the wall of the aircraft and carry it closer to the edge of the turret, being careful so as not to tug on the boy's mask and gain his attention. She saw the man sever the tubing and carefully fit it over the nozzle of the extinguisher.

She watched. Still smiling, the man leans over the rim of the turret and looks down at the boy. The boy, beginning to notice the lack of air, looks back at him, eyes widening in panic. His small hands begin to pluck frantically at the carefully tightened straps. But the man is quicker. He pulls the safety pin on the extinguisher and squeezes the release handle. A rush of freezing gas pushes its

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way through the tubing and into the boy's straining lungs. His struggles are fierce, but brief.

She sees the man disengage the tube and return the extinguisher, pin intact, to its wall mount. Then calmly detach the tubing and remove the boy's mask. Straining because of the acute angle, he lifts the boy's inert body out and carries it away to dispose of it. He fails to remember the scale model of the B-17 crushed beneath the boy's body in his final struggles.

Turning to leave, Masterson sees Thorvald, puzzled and shaken, studying the cut tubing. She takes it from him and says something. She isn't sure what.

Leaving Thorvald to guard the hangar, Masterson made a series of calls from her car phone. The first was to the assistant prosecutor assigned to the case. She wanted an immediate search warrant for the Edison estate and all vehicles garaged there. If Tommy's body had been transported from the airfield, it was probably in the trunk of a car. Fibers from his clothing would likely be found there.

She wanted included in the warrant all clothing worn by Roger Scrope. If and when they found Tommy, fibers adhering to his body could place Scrope at the scene. Lastly, she wanted a thorough search conducted for any sedatives, prescription or otherwise, that might be concealed in the house. Catherine's statement that since her marriage to Scrope she slept soundly had taken on an ominous meaning.

Oh yes, she almost forgot. Fingerprints. She wanted both Scrope and the German woman printed for comparison to any latents they might find in the aircraft. He might be able to explain most of them away legitimately as part of his proprietorship, she thought, but the fire extinguisher and the model aircraft would be tough. Still, it was all circumstantial, and she knew it. She didn't even have a body or the slightest clue where to look for it.

Her second call was to her sergeant. She needed him to get the evidence van and its crew mobilized and on its way ASAP and to make arrangements with the sheriff's office for a body dog. If Tommy had been buried nearby and in a shallow grave, and remembering Scrope's lean but flabby physique she'd bet that was the case, then the dog had a reasonable chance of finding him. To shore up their chances, she also asked that the sergeant coordinate with the state police for a chopper and an infrared scope. The heat generated by decomposition often produced red spots or "readings" against a

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cooler landscape. It could, at least, produce targets for the dog to check out.

Masterson sat back in her seat and surveyed the scene. Thorvald still stood at the hangar door, nervously shifting from one foot to the other. Valerian and Catherine Scrope had found a seat on a grassy knoll nearby and seemed to be enjoying the sun. Occasionally, Valerian would glance in Masterson's direction with a quizzical expression. Perceptive, as always, he knew something was up.

In a short while, she thought, this tranquil scene would erupt with activity. Vehicles, searchers, dogs, evidence men, and helicopters would descend on them like an invading army. She decided to send the others back in her car. Once Catherine realized that it was a body that was being looked for, she would be inconsolable. Masterson knew she would not have time to deal with that.

While she still had a few minutes and the privacy of her car, she mulled over the situation. Without a body and autopsy results her case was circumstantial at best. She felt her confidence and energy drifting away but then an idea, small at first, but insistent and pugnacious, began to force its way into her consciousness. Climbing its way up from some darker part of her, it seized her imagination and demanded action. It challenged her to set aside such things as physical evidence and logic and come to grips with the enemy. If you have no strengths, it whispered, then probe for your opponent's weaknesses. She reached for the phone and dialed Scrope's number.

Yolanda answered on the second ring. "Scrope residence." Her voice was low and husky, with only the trace of an accent.

"Ah, Yolanda," Masterson purred. "This is Captain Masterson. I'm calling from the airfield. Is your boss available?"

There was a pause. Masterson pictured Scrope shaking his head vigorously.

"No, *Miss* Masterson, I'm afraid he's engaged with business at the moment."

Bridgid didn't miss the catty dig. "Well, look over your shoulder and tell him that it is very important. Then hand him the phone."

There was a hiss of breath: Yolanda was not happy. Masterson heard the receiver clatter onto a hard surface. A few moments later it was snatched up by Scrope.

"Yes?" he nearly shouted. Nerves, she thought.

She summoned up all her bravado. "Roger," she began, letting the use of his first name sink in. "I've some important news for you."

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"By God, I should hope so, after all the upset you've caused around here. Where's my wife?"

Somewhere along the line, she heard the faint click of an extension being lifted.

"Yolanda? Is that you? Good. Stay on the line. This affects you, too."

Scrope burst in, "There's no one else on the line! What are you getting at?"

Masterson continued without answering his concerns. "We've come across several items of evidence in the hangar containing the old B-seventeen. With some physical evidence to work with now, naturally we wish to begin eliminating suspects—and family or household members."

"What . . . " Scrope sounded as if he was choking. "What kind of evidence have you found?" His tone was very reasonable now. A concerned stepfather.

Masterson ignored him. "Yolanda, is your hair naturally blond, or does it come from a bottle?"

The question was so unexpected that she forgot herself. "What? I am natural. What do you mean?"

Gotcha! Masterson crowed to herself.

"Yes, of course you are. It's just that we'll have to have some hair samples from you to compare to some we found at the airfield. Not to worry, the ones we have looked bleached . . . I think. Besides, you've never had reason to go out there with Tommy, have you? At least, I don't remember you mentioning it in your statements."

This time there was no answer, just a long pause followed by the quiet click of the extension receiver being replaced.

Scrope stepped into the silence. "Where's this leading, Captain?" He had restored her rank. "I can vouch for Yolanda."

"Even at the time of night that Tommy was taken from his bed? I don't think so, Roger. You were asleep then, remember? In any case, I'm not singling her out. I'll have to have prints from you both, as well as fiber samples from your clothes. It shouldn't take long. We can do it all right in your home."

"You suspect me, don't you?" Scrope hissed into the phone, fear and stress burning off his thin veneer. "You suspect I had something to do with Tommy's death—"

"Death? I thought we were investigating a kidnapping."

She heard a chair scrape across hardwood flooring.

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"Just relax, Roger. My team will take about thirty minutes getting there."

She disconnected and immediately dialed another number. The investigator surveilling the Scrope home answered. "Yeah, boss."

"Stan, in about ten minutes, I think, you'll see both Scrope and Yolanda leave the house in a hurry. Don't let 'em. Detain them both and separate them. I think she'll want to help us out with this thing. I've got a search warrant and team headed your way. Call me as soon as anything breaks, and remember, keep them apart!"

"Right-o, boss. I'm on it."

The call came just as the evidence van was pulling up to the hangar. "Masterson here."

"Well, boss, you were wrong. They came out in five, not ten minutes. I thought the house was on fire!"

"Anything, Stan?" Her temples were beginning to throb.

"Other than her spillin' her guts and claiming Scrope coerced her into the scheme? Nah, nothing much."

"Stan, you son of a—"

"Oh yeah, there was something else. She says she's willing to cooperate and testify against Scrope if we'll offer her a deal. She's pretty smart, huh? How long she been in this country?"

Masterson felt a sense of euphoria coming over her. "Give the big man a call and see what he's willing to go for. Remind him she's a foreigner. He'll have some calls to make."

The sight of Catherine Scrope reminded her of reality. "Stan," she whispered unnecessarily. "Can she lead us to the body?"

There was a heavy sigh on the other end. "Yeah, that too. She says they planted him out by the runway."

Masterson's euphoria completely vanished.

It was after midnight and the medical examiner's van had borne its small cargo into the darkness before Masterson had a chance to speak privately with Valerian. She had sent Thorvald and Catherine Scrope away shortly after the arrival of the evidence team with no explanation of her planned activities. Now it would be her sad duty to meet with the wretched woman and break the news of her son's death and her husband's involvement. Her comrades' congratulations only served to make her feel jaded and cynical.

She turned and looked for a moment at Valerian, who stood silently staring at the invisible horizon, floodlights from the adjacent

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excavations making his glasses opaque, his mood unreadable.

"Anthony," she began quietly, "there's something that doesn't quite add up in all this."

He did not turn and face her or give any indication that he had heard.

"It's about Thorvald," she resumed. "When you first brought him to me, I thought you were taking a big chance. I figured you suspected he had some involvement or inside knowledge of what had happened to Tommy and that that knowledge, that guilt, was what had caused the episode. I thought you were playing it close to the wire professionally by bringing a patient that you knew wanted to talk. But it didn't turn out that way. He really knew nothing."

A moisture-laden breeze drifted across them, causing them to draw closer together in the shadows of the arc lights. At the edge of the field, the same wind moved sighing through the pines and disappeared.

"So why, Anthony?" She was straining to see his face in the darkness. "Why did Thorvald land at this field? What did he see up there? If it was guilt, I could understand it. Anthony?"

When he began to speak, it was so softly that she had to bend down to hear him, though each word was distinct, as if he had thought on his reply for a long time. "Bridgid, when I brought Thorvald to your office, it wasn't because I believed he had guilty knowledge. Quite the contrary. If I had suspected that, ethically, I would have been prohibited from doing so.

"No, I knew he was telling the truth during our session. I've been in this business for twenty-five years. If anything, he was more bewildered than I was. I brought him to you because he seemed to have some connection to the case. I couldn't understand what myself. Yet I couldn't discount the coincidence of his episode with the disappearance of that poor boy. I had no idea if he had anything of value to offer you. As it was, he led us to this airfield. He had some connection to the boy. Or, more likely, the boy to him."

"Anthony, how—"

"I've no idea how." He removed his glasses and began to polish them absently with his tie. "I've spent most of my life studying the mind and its workings, yet I confess I know nothing about the movements of the soul."

They both turned, each with their separate thoughts, and stared down at the tiny empty grave.●

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"Not only are his stories compelling," author Martha Grimes said of Andrew Vachss, "he's one of the few mystery writers who begins with a social issue, and he's the only one who does it successfully." The social issue to which Andrew Vachss has devoted not only his career but his life, is child abuse. Recently he saw a long-standing ambition realized when the National Child Protection Act, a bill he helped to initiate, was signed into law.

ALIBI

by ANDREW VACHSS

I walked slowly down the corridor, my footsteps soundless against the deep burgundy carpet. The door was an ornate slab of burnished teak gleaming blackly from within its bronze frame. The immaculate surface was broken only by a small mirror set high and centered in the slab, as carefully as a jewel.

I gently touched the tiny pearl button on the door frame, watching my reflection in the mirror, knowing I was being watched from inside.

The mirror wasn't the only observer—I knew there was a video camera concealed somewhere too. I stood quietly, letting my soul radiate patience.

It didn't matter how long they made me wait. It didn't matter how closely they observed me. Nothing would make me impatient now—it had taken me a little more than four years to find that door.

Four years and almost thirty thousand dollars—the time and the money parceled out slowly, much of both wasted.

But now . . . I was close. I kept my mouth expressionless, willing the same emptiness into my eyes. Waiting.

The door opened. The man standing in the doorway was thick-bodied, competent-looking. He made no attempt to conceal the shoulder holster under his suit jacket.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"I hope so," I told him. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Mason."

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"Is he expecting you?" the man asked.

"Yes. I made an appointment. My name is—"

"If you'll just step over here and wait a bit," the man said, ushering me through the door, indicating where I was to stand, "I'll see if Mr. Mason is available."

I stood there waiting. Still waiting. Waiting still. *Stop that!* I commanded myself. I took a deep breath in through my nose, expanding my stomach. Then I let it out through my mouth as I snapped my abdominal muscles taut, exhaling the tension from my body. Calm. Calm and centered. Calm and . . .

The man returned. "If you'll just come with me . . ."

I followed him. He walked with a prizefighter's roll to his shoulders, confident in his upper-body strength. I rounded my shoulders, narrowed my silhouette. Radiating calm. Serenity. And safety to all.

The man stepped aside, moving his hand to wave me into the office. The room was huge, big enough for a half-dozen normal offices. The man behind the kidney-shaped glass desk was husky, his body covered with muscle slowly losing the battle to fat. He had a shaved head and a prominent scar on his right cheek.

"Right on time, Mr. Knight," he greeted me, motioning toward a padded leather chair set in front of the desk.

I sat down, slumping to visually reduce my size even more. I waited. Patient. Calm and patient. Quiet. No threat to anyone. So close, now . . .

"I understand you've already spoken to Roger Blue," the man who I guessed was Mr. Mason said.

I didn't answer, waiting.

"Is that right?" he asked, not even a trace of impatience in his silky voice.

"Yes," I told him. "That's right."

"Then you know what our services cost?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," I said. "In cash. No bill bigger than a hundred. No new bills, no consecutive serial numbers."

"Very good," the husky man smiled. "May I assume you have it with you?"

"Yes," I said, moving my right hand slowly so he could see the leather briefcase. "It's all here."

"Raymond will take care of that for you," Mr. Mason said, pointing with a stubby finger. A diamond glittered on his hand.

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The man who had let me in took the briefcase out of my hand, then he walked out the door, closing it behind him.

I was alone with the husky man. "This will only take a few minutes," he said. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you," I told him.

It was almost eight minutes before the man he called Raymond came back. Raymond's hands were empty. He made some gesture I didn't understand. The husky man turned to me. "Are you ready?" he asked.

I nodded. The husky man got up from behind the big desk and walked up to me. I stood up too. "What's the name?" he asked me.

"Knight," I told him. "It's my real name."

"Okay," he said. "What do your friends call you? You know, the guys you hang out with?"

"Knight," I told him.

"Knight it is," he said. "Come on."

I followed him out of the office. Down the hall, he opened another door. Inside was a staircase. A staircase down. He went first. I was behind him. I could feel Raymond behind me.

At the bottom, there was a big paneled room. In one corner there was an octagonal table covered with green felt. The border of the table had little round cut-outs, one on either side of each chair—I could see what they were for, a place to rest an ashtray and a drink. Five men were seated at the table, playing cards. There were a lot of chips in the middle of the table.

"Have a seat," the husky man said.

I took one of the empty chairs. A girl came over, said, "What will you have, sir?" She was a tall girl. She looked even taller in the fishnet stockings and black high heels. She wasn't wearing anything else.

"A glass of water," I told her.

Nobody laughed, the way they do sometimes when I say that. The girl went off and came back with a heavy-bottomed crystal tumbler full of water and ice.

"Meet your poker buddies," the husky man said to me. He went around the table, pointing at each of the five men in turn.

"Indian Pete," the husky man said.

A medium-size man with a dark, reddish complexion nodded at me.

"Sammy Belt," the husky man said.

A slender man with a wispy moustache nodded at me.

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The husky man did the same for all of them. Then he said, "Boys, this is Knight, okay? He's a semi-regular, plays stud and draw, plays for cash, no markers. He settles up each time. Sometimes he wins, sometimes he loses. Heavy cash player, but not much swing, you all got it?"

The five men nodded again.

"Questions?" the husky man said.

"You smoke?" a black man with a fine-boned face asked. His voice was Caribbean.

"No," I answered.

"Drink anything but water?" a pudgy blond man asked me.

"No," I told him.

"You mind turning around . . . slow," the man who said he was Sammy Belt asked.

I did that, one full turn. When I faced him again, he nodded an okay.

A tall slender man came over to the table. A couple of the players nodded at him, but he didn't say anything. The tall man opened a mahogany box and took out a new deck of cards. He slit the wrapper with his thumbnail and dumped the cards out onto the green felt. Then he shuffled the cards, his hands moving in a blur, faster and cleaner than any machine. When he was done, he looked up expectantly.

"We need you to play a few hands," the husky man said. "Take you maybe an hour, an hour and a half, all right? Just so we can get a look at your style."

The tall slender man looked at the pudgy blond guy to his left, raising his eyebrows in a question.

"Draw," the pudgy blond man said.

The tall man tapped the table in front of him. Each player tossed a blue chip into the middle. "The chips are twenty, fifty, and a hundred," the husky man said. "You'll probably need about five grand worth."

"You already—" I started to say.

"This is an honest game," the husky man said. "Dead honest. If you don't play—with your own money—we can't really get to know you. And you can't get what you're paying for."

I took five thousand dollars out of my jacket and put it on the table. A girl came over. A redhead, shorter than the first one but dressed the same way. She opened a box. It was lined with white velvet. She put three stacks of chips in front of me: red, white, and blue. Then she put my money in the box and walked away.

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I tossed a blue chip into the middle of the table like the others, and the tall man dealt the cards. The men were good players. I'm a good player, too. After about an hour, the man called Sammy Belt said, "You don't talk much, do you?"

"No," I said.

"That's the way you are? All the time?"

"Yes," I said.

The man they called Indian Pete laughed.

The husky man came back into the room. He tapped me on the shoulder. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"Good," I said.

"Let's count them up," he said. He spread my chips around on the green felt. "You got sixty-one hundred dollars here," he said. "Jo-Jo will cash you out."

I guess the redhead was Jo-Jo because she came over with the velvet-lined box. She put my chips inside, then she counted out the money for me—sixty-one hundred-dollar bills.

"Here's the setup," the husky man said to me. "The house cuts every pot five percent. That's all you pay, ever. Anything you want to eat, anything you want to drink, it's on the house. Got rooms upstairs where you can take a nap, take a shower, take one of the girls if she's willing, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"The house provides the dealer." He pointed at the tall man. "That's Slim. This is his table. Your table too, all right? This table is only stud and draw—no red dog, no wild cards, nothing fancy. Other tables, they have different rules. The five percent of each pot, that buys you the entire services of the club, understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Anything else?" the husky man asked, glancing around the men seated at the table. Nobody said anything. The husky man put his hands behind his back. "Knight here comes in around ten," he said, watching me. I nodded. "Leaves around four, five in the morning."

I nodded again.

"What night?" the husky man asked me.

"Tomorrow," I told him.

"You got it," the husky man said. "Remember what Roger Blue told you, right? Tomorrow is what you bought for your fifty large. It don't go down like you expected, you want to do this again, it costs the same."

"I know," I told him.

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* * *

I went out around nine the next night. The doorman saw me leave. He's very alert.

The doorman pushed the call button. A light would go on outside, a signal that a cab was needed. When a taxi pulled up, the doorman opened the back door for me. I thanked him and palmed a dollar bill into his hand.

I told the cabdriver where to go. He wrote the destination down on his trip sheet. When he pulled up in front of the club, I thanked him for the ride. I gave him a tip, too.

I walked the rest of the way. It was almost midnight before I arrived at his house, a big house in a fancy neighborhood. I went over the back fence. He didn't have a dog. I knew that from watching. I'd been watching a long time.

The back door lock wasn't much. I slipped inside. He lived alone. It was easier for him to be himself that way.

I moved toward the light. He was watching television. On the screen, it showed a little boy. The boy was . . . it wasn't television he was watching, it was a videotape.

The same kind of videotape I knew he'd made of my son. The police had never found it, but I knew.

I made a little noise so he'd turn around. He saw me then. He sat back in his chair, startled.

"Wha . . . ?"

"You know who I am?" I asked him.

"No. Look, if you want—"

"It's you I want," I said quietly. "For what you did to my son. My son David. Remember?"

Sweat broke out all along his hairline, but his voice was calm. "Look, I . . . I know who you are. I couldn't tell at first . . . in that bad light. I . . . don't blame you. Any father would be enraged if that sort of thing happened to his kid. But I was the wrong man. Come on, you remember—you were at the trial, for God's sake! It wasn't me. You know that. It wasn't me. It's a terrible thing, what happened to your boy. But it wasn't me. They all testified. That whole night, I was—"

"I know where you were," I told him. "I'm there myself. Right now." ●

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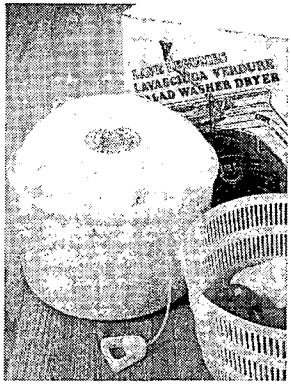

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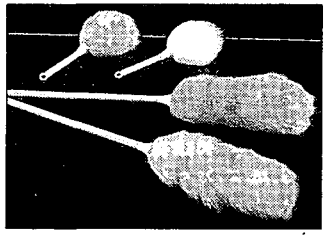

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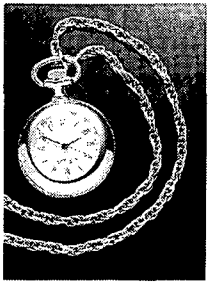

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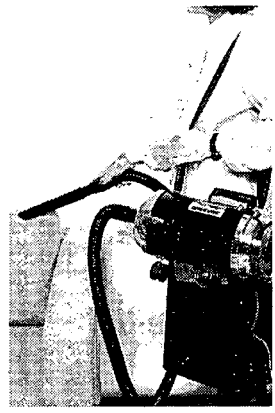

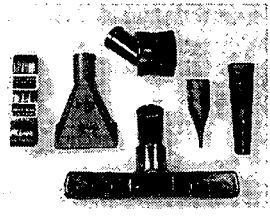

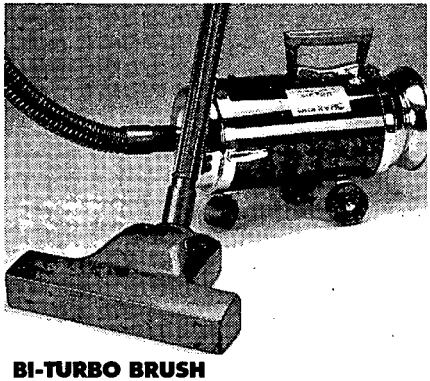

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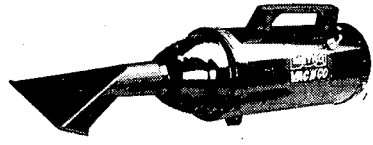

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Write about what you know? Writers writing about writers are common in our field, but Robert Barnard gives the subject a wicked twist when he targets another genre entirely, the series romance . . .

THE SLAVE TRADE

by ROBERT BARNARD

"I was sold!" Mirella would proclaim, when she had at last got some kind of independence and a circle of friends in London. "I was a lot in a baby auction!" And if one of those friends pointed out that the normal procedures of adoption must have been followed, she would say darkly: "Money must have changed hands. How else could Charmayne Courtauld have been considered a fit parent?"

And there she had a point. Perhaps the powers-that-be had been impressed by the haute-bourgeois comforts of the Courtauld residence: the suite from Maples, the thick-piled carpets, the shrubbery and the lawns that ran down from the French windows to the river Wye. Perhaps they had been reassured by Lewis Courtauld, found him sensible and dependable ("sensible he can *not* have been," Mirella would say, "if he thought his wife could make a suitable mother"). Anyway, however it came about, the adoption went through, and quite soon after that Lewis went to an early grave ("first blinded by flashbulbs and then poisoned by saccharine," said Mirella), and mother and daughter were left alone.

Well, not exactly alone. Charmayne Courtauld's status as the number one purveyor of romantic fiction to the nation meant that there was no question of her being a full-time mother. Indeed, Mirella's only memories of her mother in her early years were of photo

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sessions and interviews—ladies with notebooks and pencils, men with threatening-looking apparatus draped over their shoulders. And of course Charmayne in pastel colours swanning it on the sofa, a vase of matching flowers beside her, generously sharing her philosophy of life from behind the thick, smelly mask which served as her face.

Mirella's part in these sessions ended one day when she ran over to her nanny, pointed at Charmayne, and asked: "Minny, who is that woman?" By then she was seven, and old enough to know what she was doing. As indeed she did.

The loneliness of Mirella's childhood was compounded by the fact that none of her nannies stayed long. In stately homes in those days there was often a resident nanny who cared for generations of the family's children: a tough creature inured to upper-class ill-manners, or compensated for them by the thought that she was employed by a person of title. Working for Charmayne Courtauld offered no such compensations. Though Charmayne might be as sweet as molasses for the first few days, after that her innate greed, egotism, and vulgarity began to show through, and she became tyrannical and abusive. It was a bit like being a member of Mrs. Thatcher's cabinet, but whereas that lady's victims had no other cabinet to go to, the nannies had ample prospects of lucrative employment elsewhere. Some stuck it for a few months, because to say, "I'm nanny to Charmayne Courtauld's little girl!" had a certain cachet, particularly if followed by: "That woman is a *sow!*" But one after another they went. Minny stuck it much longer than most, but she was sacked the day of the "Who is that woman?" incident, and Mirella was despatched to school.

Most women educated in convent schools have horror stories of nuns who ranged from tough-as-old-boots to downright sadistic. Mirella, on the other hand, was almost happy for the first time in her life. Quite soon she persuaded Charmayne to plead for her summer holidays to be no more than a fortnight, owing to the "pressure of her creative work." Often the Christmas and Easter holidays could be spent in the homes of school friends. Mirella's time with—that is, in the vicinity of—Charmayne amounted to only a small fraction of the year. For most of the time she could forget that she had a mother, and Charmayne could forget that she had a child.

Except of course that the press knew, and Charmayne was asked about her daughter. She had various mechanisms to cope with this (just as, after the "Who is that woman?" remark, she had come up

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with "Such a *humorous* child—such a comic!", hoping that the reporter had missed the flash of rage that had illuminated her face). She would say, "Boarding school is part of the process of growing up," ignoring the fact that it is a peculiarly English aberration, and, "We enjoy each other's company so much more when we *are* together." And the pinch of salt with which this was taken did not get into the feature articles: Charmayne Courtauld was terrible when roused, and she was, after all, an object of perennial interest to the readers of the tabloids and the women's magazines.

Mirella went through her childhood, girlhood, puberty, and early womanhood under the eyes of the nuns, who had seen it all before. She was on one occasion asked by Sister Antony if she thought she had a vocation.

"Oh no, I'm sure I haven't," she said. "I'm too consumed with anger."

"Good heavens—what has that to do with it? Think of Sister Clare!"

"I could never take the veil," said Mirella. "It would suit my mother too well."

"Ah well, perhaps you're right," sighed Sister Antony. "It doesn't sound as if you have a vocation."

Mirella's reply recognised the fact that when she left school Charmayne would be presented with the need to make a decision. A letter from her suggested a finishing school in Switzerland, but that was turned down flat. Charmayne came over to Newbury, the nearest town, and they met for lunch (even someone of Charmayne's insensitivity would have felt awkward coming for the first time to the school which her daughter had been attending for ten years). The meal became a haggling session over the rack of lamb and raspberry parfait. Mirella wanted to be supported through secretarial and then business school in London.

"Such nonsense!" said Charmayne. "Women are not meant for *business*. You'll fall in love and marry before you get your degree."

"I shall never love," said Mirella. "Nobody has shown me how."

That was the first time she played the best card in her hand. She got her way because Charmayne recognised that she was being blackmailed. Mirella went to London, did a crash course at a secretarial college, then went on to business school. Nobody could say she had a first-class brain, but she had quite a good second-class one. She graduated, went into a firm of merchant bankers, and did moderately well there. The circle of friends she acquired was a shift-

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ing one: They married (as she announced so often she never would), moved out of London, or went up or down in the financial world to a point outside her own middling sphere. Some just let her drop, finding she became a bit of a bore with her obsession about the mother she never saw.

It was in 1984 that Mirella got a note.

> Darling—couldn't we meet? It seems ages since I've seen you. It would be lovely if you could come down to dear old Greenglades again.
>
> Your loving mother

Mirella's first instinct was to crumple the letter and throw it away. Particularly as it was scented. What kind of mother sends scented notes to her daughter? Except that Charmayne Courtauld probably didn't have any other kind of paper. Mirella let the note sit over the weekend on the coffee table by her favourite chair, where it acquired several brown rings. On the Monday she typed a brisk note: "Coming Monday 23rd. Mirella." That did rather assert, she felt, that the meeting would take place on her own terms.

As indeed, in some ways, it did. When she arrived by taxi from the station there was no kiss, not even a peck. Mirella briskly asked for coffee rather than tea, digestive rather than chocolate biscuits, registering at the time that the domestic who prepared the refreshments wore the usual expression of resentful acceptance that seemed likely to lead before long to blowup and departure.

"I've ordered a lovely little lunch for us," said Charmayne gaily.

They talked over Mirella's career in the City, her friends, her prospects. Several times Charmayne asked questions that showed she hadn't been listening—par for the course, Mirella thought, when anyone else's affairs were being discussed. Then they got on to Charmayne's own career.

"I write so *fast*. It flows so beautifully," Charmayne said. "I just speak into a tape recorder and send it to this wonderful little woman in Bristol who I never *see*, who types it up for me. She's so grateful for the money. I have manuscripts ready and waiting to be sent off—" she flapped a hand at a pile of neat-looking printouts on the table. "I could take a year off—two—and my lovely readers would still get a regular Charmayne Courtauld every three or four months."

What interested Mirella was not the unstoppable flow of Courtaulds but the state of her mother's mind. She noticed that, even

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when talking about her own affairs, there were odd lapses: She forgot the name of her editor at Bills and Moon, though Mirella was pretty sure, from the attempts she made at it, that it was the same editor she had had when she was a girl. She had three publishers—the second for historicals, the third for pseudonymous works—and she kept getting them all mixed up. Over crab quiche and salad, served resentfully and cooked, it seemed, with no particular flair, Charmayne said:

"What I need is a business manager."

"Oh?" said Mirella with studied neutrality.

"Someone who'd simply take care of the money side. Not an agent, but someone who would look after investments, property, that kind of thing."

"Yes, I can see that would be a help."

"The logical person would be you. You've got a business brain, and all this—" flap went the bejewelled hand "—will be yours one day."

Mirella went on chewing limp lettuce, and then took another mouthful of quiche.

"Is this an offer?" she asked.

"Of course it is, darling."

"*Please* don't call me darling, Mother. . . . I'd need to think it over."

"Of *course,* da— of course, Mirella," said Charmayne. "Take all the time in the world."

Mirella thought about it so much she decided to stay for the night. They walked around the garden a little, and when Charmayne was occupied with other matters Mirella made a brisk tour of the house, making an updated assessment of what would be hers one day. That evening, after her mother had wandered off to bed, Mirella went and knocked on the door of the domestic help. Her visit was not very graciously received, but the help, who was called Doris Tripp, was willing to talk about Charmayne's mental condition.

"Oh, she's failing all right," she said. "Not badly, but you can see it. Orders things from the local shops, then forgets she's done it and sends the things back with an indignant note. And of course I get the brunt of it. Going slightly barmy doesn't make her any *nicer.* I'd heard all about her before I took the job, so it's no surprise. I don't suppose I'll stick it much longer."

"If I'm in charge of the finances I could make it worth your while to stay," said Mirella. "She shouldn't have a succession of housekeepers if she's failing."

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"Hmmm—well, you'd have to make it worth my while," said Doris Tripp.

The next day Mirella went back to London, saying she was still thinking the offer over. She rang Charmayne's editor at Bills and Moon and asked if she could come over for a chat. The woman sounded distinctly surprised ("Of course I knew she *had* a daughter . . .") but agreed at once. When she heard that Mirella was considering becoming Charmayne's financial adviser she upped the invitation to a lunch date.

Lunch was at a distinctly dingy Greek dive, suggesting that Bills and Moon were not in the habit of fêting their authors. Gillian Krantz, the editor, was a jolly woman with an aggressive frontage of double chin and a realistic outlook on life.

"Of course your mother's always been one of our best authors," she said. "Absolutely reliable—spot on most of the time."

"You mean absolutely predictable."

"Exactly."

"I sense a 'but' waiting in the wings."

"You're right. Or at least a 'till recently.' "

"Ah. I got a certain sense that her mind was going."

"So that is it. I rather thought there might be a problem there."

"What are the signs?"

"The plots are usually perfectly all right, but there are oddities in the treatment: sometimes she seems to have reverted to a previous age—talking about the 'wireless,' or travelling by L.N.E.R. when the stories are set today. Characters change their names, big city settings suddenly become country towns, doctors' wives suddenly become solicitors' wives. With anyone else one might wonder whether they were in love, but not Charmayne. . . ."

"Is this just a matter of tidying things up?"

"Well . . . mostly it is, and we can do it ourselves. But you see, Charmayne's suddenly started to write so *much*."

"Really?"

"Oh, really. It used to be five a year, for her various publishers, but in the last few months it's become all but unstoppable. And some of them have had faults, discrepancies, that have been major. So we just started rejecting the unsatisfactory ones."

"I see," said Mirella, thinking of the piles of manuscripts at Greenglades.

"There's nothing, even in the worst ones, that couldn't be put right. You could do it yourself. We reject them because, popular

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though she is, there's no way we'd want to do more Charmayne Courtaulds per year than we already do."

"I see," said Mirella.

"You could be sitting on a gold mine," said Gillian Krantz, her chins wobbling with emotion. "A nice little earner for years and years."

They looked at each other. The tough Greek mutton began to taste quite good to Mirella. She smiled across the table.

When Mirella accepted the job and left the merchant bankers, she told her friends, her small London circle, that there was no question of her moving down to Greenglades, though she'd have to go down there quite often. While she commuted she made a habit of abstracting a typescript from the pile in the lounge and working on it in London, getting it into publishable shape for the future. The vagaries of Charmayne's mind amused her mightily, but she found that, as Gillian had said, the errors and inconsistencies were fairly minor, so the cleaning-up process involved her in very little work.

As she became better acquainted with Charmayne's financial position she found she preferred to spend more time at Greenglades—eventually almost all the time. Charmayne had a great deal of money wrapped up in this or that—shares, property, overseas bank accounts. She was, on Charmayne's death, going to be a very wealthy woman. She visited bank managers, brokers, lawyers, maximising the estate's potential. She pushed up rents, bullied tenants, and generally enjoyed herself. One thing gave her particular satisfaction. She discovered that a sum of money—not large, but then Charmayne had never been generous—was paid regularly into the bank account of a woman in Bath. Through some discreet investigation she found out that the woman had worked for many years for what was now called the social services department of the local council. She stopped the payment at once, and when letters of protest were received she tore them up, smiling.

Charmayne was the rub, of course, but not too much of one. For a lot of the time she was shut away alone in her study, dictating endlessly to her amanuensis in Bristol. The unceasing stream of pap was, Mirella thought, Charmayne's way of keeping at bay any consciousness of the fact that she was failing. She came out for meals, for what she called "drinkie-poos" at night, and she was, after she got used to Mirella's presence, her usual objectionable self. Mirella ignored her. She seethed, but she gave no sign, simply going on with what she was doing. When she insulted Doris Tripp, Mirella

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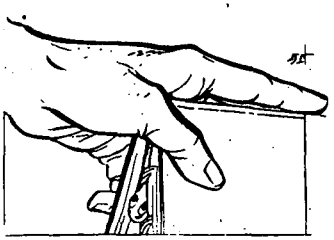
would say: "I'll come down and talk to you about it later, Doris," thus emphasising that it was she who was running the house now. She was usually able to bundle Charmayne off to bed about nine, and then the rest of the day was hers. She was renovating the house room by room, making it less pink and more modern. Bit by bit she was finding out everything about it, inside and out, getting to know what was going to be hers. She had found Charmayne's copy of the will, which was indeed very simple and left everything to her. So much was on her shoulders that she simply thought of herself as having already come into her birthright. It was really very satisfying.

But an awful lot of work. If she was not working on the stream of manuscripts Charmayne was producing, she was communicating with publishers, checking that advances and royalties had been received, retrieving rights to out-of-print titles, getting together the first-ever Charmayne Courtauld bibliography, reading the financial pages, selling or buying stocks and shares, dealing with Doris Tripp, or the gardener, or the interior decorator. It was a full-time job and more.

But it was satisfying, having control in this way. She was, she told herself, reversing the position of her childhood: The slave had become the slave owner. And if Charmayne was in a particularly troublesome mood she would simply shout at her:

"I can leave at any time, you know. You haven't bought me."

She did not notice that when she said that Charmayne often bent her head to conceal an unpleasant smile playing around her lips. Because as Doris Tripp had said, going senile didn't make you any pleasanter a person. And Charmayne, in her more lucid moments, knew that she had bought Mirella. And what was more, she had done it twice over.



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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL COLLINS

Born in St. Louis of British parents who came to the United States to pursue careers in the theater, Michael Collins (aka Dennis Lynds) spent most of his childhood in Brooklyn, New York. He currently resides in Santa Barbara, California and sets much of his work in his adopted state. His new story for EQMM *features the detective for whom he is best known, the one-armed Dan Fortune . . .*

A DEATH IN MONTECITO

by MICHAEL COLLINS

The house was a two-story white Colonial with blue trim, unusual for Southern California. Deep in the shadows of western oaks and sycamores, it stood on the bank of a creek that was dry for eight months even in a good rain year. This had not been a good rain year, and the creek and ground were thickly littered with brown leaves under the dusty trees.

"It was built by an Easterner nostalgic for home," Deborah Urban, legally "Urbanski," said. "The perfect house for my father. He's an overage hippie. He just had to buy the opposite of what people expected. It's the only one like it in Montecito. That kind of thing's important to him."

There was an edge of anger in her voice when she spoke of Gus Urbanski, and I realized I knew her. At least her face and the feature stories in *Parade* and *People*. Two movies I could recall offhand: a big spy thriller, *Fog of Terror,* or something like that; and a teenage drug flick I can't put a name to but the director was important. The magazine stories had been all about her men and work. An early marriage to a violent ex-jock with grown kids, and a second to the

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kid costar of the teen angst flick. That one broke up in less than a year over his drug habit. Or hers. Or both.

"It could be just right for me, too," I said.

Tree forts decayed high in a big old holly oak and an even bigger sycamore. Swings hung from thick tree limbs that jutted out over the dry creek. One, made of an old automobile tire, was festooned with spider webs and old leaves. The other was a real swing with a clean wooden seat. Down in the creek bed a deflated rubber raft lay half buried under leaves and debris.

She said, "What makes you think the house is for sale, Mr. Fortune?"

"My real-estate agent told me. He said it wasn't listed, but he figured it was coming on the market."

"Ghouls, all of them!"

She was dressed for a night in Hollywood—a sleek white sheath that barely covered her from nipples to crotch left a vast expanse of very firm, very smooth, very tanned flesh. But it wasn't night and she wasn't in Hollywood. She was in the dim late-afternoon shadows under thick oaks and sycamores looking at the house where her mother had been murdered.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Lawyers and real-estate agents. They read the papers and see money. You were close to your mother?"

"As close as I could be from Malibu or whatever godforsaken part of the world I have to go to. Closer than Sarah. She likes my father."

"I guess you don't."

"A man who walked out on his wife and children? No, I don't like my father." Her hands pulled at a wadded facial tissue she'd found somewhere inside the tight white sheath. "You were sent on a wild-goose chase, Mr. Fortune. I expect Mother . . . left the house to my sister and me. Sarah'll want to live in it. She likes this town. The quiet life." She laughed. "A rent-free house would've sounded good to me a few years ago."

"Not now?"

"Rent isn't my problem, and the quiet life isn't in the picture for a long time. In Hollywood you're *on* and *there* twenty-four hours a day." She smiled. A devastating smile: girlish, wistful, sexy, enticing, warm, and melting all at once. "Besides, I think I'd like to know the house is here for me when I burn out. And I will; everyone does down there." The smile blended almost magically into a hard face of sheer will power and determination. "But not yet. Not by a long shot."

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"The real-estate agent told me your mother had been planning to sell the house and move away before . . ."

"That man in Santa Fe? She'd never have done it. My mother thought about as much of men as I do."

I smiled. "You're young to give up on men."

Her face went cold. She was a chameleon, mercurial. Maybe you have to be to succeed in Hollywood.

"How old do you think a woman has to be, Mr. Fortune?"

"Sorry again, none of my business. I'm not usually that insensitive. The house is just so attractive."

She softened, seemed to see my empty left sleeve for the first time. "Look, Mr. Fortune, we haven't even thought about what to do with the house, I'm sorry."

She turned to go inside.

"If I could take a fast tour, I wouldn't bother you again."

Out of the sun, the interior was cool. I walked from room to room studying the layout of the furniture.

In the living room everything was clean and untouched, except a grouping of a love seat and armchair around a coffee table and a color TV set. The armchair lay on its side, and there were two coffee-stained coasters on the coffee table. An irregular stain had dried dark on the carpet.

Deborah Urban nodded to the color TV. "Mom set that up for when she and my father had company, not that he cared about any company at home. Coffeehouses and bars was his speed."

The family room was a glassed-in porch at the rear. A shabby blue futon couch sat directly on the floor in front of another color TV with a blue-painted coffee table between. A massive leather recliner stood in a far corner, its footrest raised, a narrow sidetable beside it.

"Your mother always had the furniture arranged like this?"

She frowned. "I haven't been in the house in years, but it does look different." She continued to glance around as we walked, and seemed puzzled. "She'd moved things, but I can't say what. Does it matter?"

"Just wondering what other arrangements might look good."

A chandelier hung in the center of the formal dining room, but the dining table and chairs had been pushed against a wall between two windows where the sunlight came through the trees. Sideboards

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and a china cabinet were in normal positions against other walls, leaving a large open space covered by a rug.

The master bedroom was arranged for a single occupant.

"I really would like to be alone now, Mr. Fortune. I have to go to a cocktail party, and—?"

"Of course. I've bothered you enough."

She emerged less than an hour later. A chauffeur held the door of a black stretch limousine. She climbed in, the limo drove off. I got out of my car and walked back to the house.

There were no footprints in the hard dirt, but a path had been crushed through the dry leaves from the blacktop driveway to the steps up to the rear door. On the door the lock had been literally torn out of the frame. I got down on my knees and examined the lock and frame. There were no dents, no marks, and the frame had been broken before: repaired with screws and paint. It had been broken again at the same places, the screws torn loose. I wondered if someone had expected it would do that?

Back inside, the two coffee cups the police had found drying in the kitchen drainer that day were still there. The two other bedrooms had become storage rooms stacked with dusty boxes. In each, unpainted shelves were full of toys, dolls, and children's keepsakes. In the rear one, rows of stuffed animals gathered dust on a top shelf. A family of three bears seemed lonely without a Goldilocks. Small stains on the floor of the rear bedroom were blood.

I got my camera and went to work.

Gus Urbanski studied the series of color snapshots sadly. "Yeah, that's the house. Where'd you get these?"

"Real-estate agent," I said. "Told me the house would come on the market soon."

"I wouldn't know," Urbanski said. He stared at the photos of each room. "Twelve years since I set foot inside the house. Sarah was still climbing trees and riding rafts down the creek, much to her mother's horror. Debbie'd never heard of Hollywood."

"It's hard to be thirteen in America and not know about Hollywood, Mr. Urbanski," I said.

He laughed, his chair on the rickety deck tilted against the cabin wall. "Truth is in the image, not the facts. Debbie was as far as Jupiter from imagining the life she has now. Big bucks, magazine covers, two bad marriages before she's twenty-five. The movie star."

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He was short and wiry, with a ragged gray beard and skin the color of cordovan from years of fierce suns. Early fifties, he looked like a man who could outlast a mule, and sounded like one who didn't care a damn about anything but his own views.

"What did she imagine?" I asked.

"A nurse. She was going to be an angel to the sick. Sarah was going to explore the universe. Now Deb's cruising the world jiggling her tits, and Sarah's running a boutique shop in town."

"Is that bad?"

"Not if it's what they want. That's what counts: doing exactly what you want. Self-sufficient, and never do what you don't want to do. That's why I had to get out of that house and what went with it." He looked at the photos. "Too bad, too. I liked the house. Seeing it inside again, I remember."

"Sounds like you had good times there."

His rustic cabin was on the first steep slope above Mountain Drive, and the unpainted deck had a view of the city below, the sea and Channel Islands, and half the world in all directions.

"The kids and I did." He looked out at his view. "When I went off on a trip, I brought something exotic from wherever the hell I'd been for Sarah, and one of those stuffed animals for Debbie. She loved those animals."

"How did the back door get broken?"

He shrugged. "Kicked it down one night. One of the things made me realize I had to leave. Split the goddamn door, and had to replace it. Too expensive to replace the frame, so I put it back together with glue and screws and painted it."

"Looks like that's how the killer got in," I said. "Broke the door open at the weak spot, grabbed the kitchen hammer, hit her in the living room. Some vagrant, the police say. Tragic."

He stared at me. "You don't want to buy the house. You didn't come here because you thought I still owned a share in it. Who the hell are you?"

"Just someone interested in the house, Mr. Urbanski."

"Get the hell out of here!"

Santa Barbara Polo Field is an expanse of grass on the east end of Montecito surrounded by trees and condominiums. It's used for dog shows, classic auto rallies, and even polo on weekends and special occasions when princes, kings, and South American millionaires come to ride their ponies and swing a mallet.

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Most of the time it's an exotic front yard for the condos.

Kevin Moore lived in a second-floor unit in building number twelve. The smallest and cheapest unit they sold—no garden, terrace, or second bedroom. I found Carol Urbanski's brother out front polishing a classic MG.

Moore put the snapshots on the hood of the car. "Who told you Carol left me part of the house?"

"Didn't she?" I said. "The real-estate agent must have made a mistake."

"Hell, I don't know. Haven't heard anything about the will yet. Could be she did."

A slender man an inch under six feet, he wore white flannel slacks, a flowing navy-blue shirt, and an ascot. A tennis sweater was tied around his neck by its arms. The MG had a vanity plate—GO NAVY 3—and a naval-reserve sticker.

He studied the photos, maybe willing the house to be his. "A goddamn officer's pension doesn't go far these days, and our old man left her most of the money. 'The poor abandoned woman' and all that. Maybe she decided she owed me, you know? What were you thinking of offering, Mr. Fortune?"

"I'm not sure. Those photos don't really tell me a lot."

Kevin Moore picked up the snapshots again. "They don't do it justice, that's for sure. And the furniture's all moved around. Looks terrible. Why the hell do that when she was selling the place? Look at the dining-room table. Awful."

I said, "Maybe she didn't move the furniture."

"What? Who the hell else could—?"

"Maybe whoever killed her," I said.

"What the hell for?"

"Looking for something?" I said. "Hidden money, jewels, or just something important to someone."

"But how would a vagrant—?"

"He wouldn't."

Kevin Moore stared. "You're saying the police are wrong? Some damned nut didn't kill her?"

"Seems like a possibility. The furniture, the door with the broken lock, nothing stolen . . ."

He blinked into space, appeared to be thinking hard. "No, no way. The police would know if it wasn't some crazy, right?" Then he licked his lips. "I'm sorry . . . I've got to go. An appointment. . . ."

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He turned and went into the building, leaving the MG half polished.

The patrol car picked me up at the polo field and escorted me to sheriff's headquarters across from the jail in Goleta. Deputy Sergeant Max Marquez pointed to a chair.

"Gus Urbanski wants to know what you're doing, Dan. So do we. Why the undercover act?"

"I'm working for Ronnie Dawes. It's the way he wanted it."

"Carol Urbanski's lawyer? What's he think he knows?"

"The furniture in the house was moved around, rearranged."

Marquez waited. "That's it? Someone moved the furniture?"

"And what didn't happen."

"What didn't happen?"

"Nothing was taken, she wasn't raped, and no vagrants or even strangers were seen near the house."

"*Nobody* was seen near the house. Vagrants have been around Montecito the last two months. The kitchen door was broken, the weapon was the hammer she kept in the kitchen. He broke in, she surprised him, he killed her and ran before he could grab anything."

"Dawes says none of the neighbors had coffee with her. He didn't have coffee with her. Who did she have coffee with?"

"Christ, Dan, maybe it was the milkman."

"In the living room? She didn't use it three times a year. The kitchen or family room, maybe. But not the living room, and the odds say not with some casual stranger who killed her."

"Odds aren't proof."

"They raise a doubt."

"Not to me," Marquez said. "The leaves were walked through, the back-door lock was broken. Everyone except Gus Urbanski had a key, and Gus has the only decent alibi."

"What?"

Marquez looked up at the ceiling. "He was in San Luis. He was seen there early and late. He could have driven down and back, but he sure wouldn't have had time to move furniture."

"The others?"

"Sarah, the younger kid, was in her shop. She did lunch and errands and there are big gaps. Ms. Hollywood was on location in the Mojave, went back to L.A. for a photo session, karate class, and shopping errands. No one can say for sure she was at the karate class or did any shopping. If she cut the class she had time to squeeze

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in a murder and make it back to the Mojave when she did. The brother was out sailing alone, and the cowboy lover was in Santa Fe."

He leaned back and looked at me. "They could all've killed her, or they could all've been doing exactly what they say. Just about normal for alibis." Now he leaned forward. "But no one saw any of them near the house, we didn't find any evidence, and all but Urbanski had keys."

"The furniture didn't rearrange itself."

"Then she rearranged it."

"What sense would it make to move a dining table and a reclining chair from their normal spots to crazy places when you planned to sell the house?"

Marquez chewed a pencil. "You think the killer rearranged the furniture?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Maybe to find some item and take it away before she sold the house. That means someone who'd been in the house before."

Marquez looked out his windows. "Forget about no witnesses and no evidence. And say one of them is lying about the alibi. You've still got a big problem."

"Motive?"

"Bingo. We couldn't find a smell of one. Hell, we couldn't even *invent* one."

A compact woman of twenty-two, Sarah Urbanski had the look of an athlete. Her blond hair was short and ragged. She wore stained jeans, running shoes, and a green cotton blouse where she stood on the edge of the dry creek bed behind her dead mother's house.

"The raft was mine. The tree forts and swings were both of ours. We had great times. I loved to climb in all the trees. I used to stay up there for hours. I especially loved the creek in a rainy winter. I'd send paper boats down to the sea, and go down myself on the raft. God, did I get in trouble for that. Twice the cops pulled me out and brought me home. Mom and Debbie were mad as hell. Gus, that's my dad, was already gone."

She continued to stare down into the dry creek. "Always doing something, that was me. Dirt biking, running, climbing in the mountains. Debbie was the stay-at-home. Pets and stuffed animals. Now I'm still here, and Deb's all over the world."

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She appeared to think about still being in Santa Barbara while her sister was all over the world. "We haven't even started to think about the house, Mr. Fortune."

"Of course. It must be a shock, your mother murdered."

She looked at my empty left sleeve, as if maybe she'd seen me around town, knew what I really did. "You're sure your real-estate agent said the house was for sale?"

"Agents aren't very sensitive. But could I bother you just another moment, and take a look inside? I mean, in case you do decide to sell?"

In the living room the armchair still lay on its side in front of the color TV, and the two coffee-stained coasters were still on the coffee table. The irregular stains had darkened more on the carpet near the fallen armchair.

Sarah Urbanski touched the TV. "Carol set it up here for her and Gus. Kids weren't supposed to clutter up the living room. But Gus liked us all to watch in the family room."

I walked through the other rooms. "Is this the way the furniture has always been?"

We were in the family room. She looked around. "I haven't been in the house for a year. Maybe it's not exactly . . ." Then she stopped looking at the furniture. "You weren't told the house was for sale. Who are you? What do you want here?"

"What a private detective always wants, Sarah. Answers."

"Answers? About what? Who sent you?"

"Your mother's lawyer doesn't think a vagrant killed her."

"He's wrong! Now you get—"

"The furniture was moved and put back in all the wrong places. Dawes thinks the killer was looking for something."

"Is that what you think?"

"I think that's one possibility."

Surprised and angry, she calmed down fast. A thoughtful young woman, or maybe she had more on her mind than me. "Looking for what?"

"That was going to be my question."

She went to stand at the expanse of windows that faced the mountains. "I didn't get along with my mother, Mr. Fortune. But I didn't kill her."

"How did everyone else get along with her?"

"Debbie got along fine. She lives in another town. Dad got out. Uncle Kevin sponged off her. I don't know about the cowboy, except

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she was hot to sell the house and fly off to Santa Fe."

"What did you think about that?"

"I was ecstatic. Mom would be a thousand miles away. Maybe we could even really talk to each other."

"Who killed her, Sarah?"

She returned to the futon, sat, and didn't look at me. "A prowler. That's all it could be."

"Then who moved the furniture?"

"Mom must have moved it herself. Mr. Dawes is wrong."

The mountains towered north and east of Santa Fe, snow on the highest peak as white and startling in the hot sun as Edgar Bowers's hair. He held the photos and looked out and up at the peaks from the shaded patio of his old Spanish-style house.

"This isn't how the house was arranged the last time I was there. I never saw the furniture that way."

"You were there less than a month ago?"

"Three weeks. It was when Carol agreed to move here and give it a try. Us and Santa Fe and away from Santa Barbara and all she was carrying since Gus left."

"Were you surprised, Mr. Bowers?"

He glanced back at me, then returned to his peaks. "A little. I told her all along she was dying there, not living, but she couldn't seem to let go. I wasn't sure she ever would."

He put the pictures on a bench, but still looked up toward the snow peaks. "You're from the police, Mr. Fortune? You've decided it wasn't some unknown intruder after all?"

"Private," I said. "An unknown intruder is still the official opinion."

"Who has an unofficial opinion?"

"Her lawyer."

"On what does he base this opinion?"

"The rearranged furniture. He thinks someone was searching for something."

He looked down at the photos again. He was a tall, slender man in well-worn jeans, denim shirt, cowboy hat, and boots, inlaid silver belt buckle, and a drooping moustache as white as his hair. But he was no ageing cowboy. A full professor at the University of New Mexico. The clothes went with the geography, not the work.

"Because she was planning to sell the house?"

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"That's what the lawyer thinks. Did she say anything to you about any of them not wanting her to sell?"

"As far as I know, she hadn't informed them yet, but she expected all of them to oppose her." His voice grew angry. "I told her it proved she did have to get out."

"Did she mention anything one of them might want?"

"No."

"Did she ever say whose idea it was for her and Gus Urbanski to break up?"

"No. I think it was simply two people with absolute ideas of what life *should* be no matter what the other wanted."

"But they kept in touch?"

"Only through the children, as far as I know."

I said, "You were surprised when she agreed to leave Santa Barbara. You never expected her to sell the house. Where had you expected to live with her?"

His dark blue eyes didn't flicker a hair. "Nowhere. Here, or nowhere."

The house wasn't a mansion, or unusual, or especially beautiful. One of thousands of beach houses in Southern California. It was the location that made it extra desirable and therefore extra expensive. Malibu. The best part. On the beach. With important neighbors. Important in Hollywood, anyway.

The maid let me in.

"I never met a private eye before," Debbie Urban said, and laughed. "Especially one who suspects me of evil deeds."

Sarah Urbanski said, "What do you want this time, Mr. Fortune?"

They were in a living room the size of my whole hacienda in Summerland, with so much glass you felt you could walk straight across the beach into the ocean. Coffee cups and Irish whiskey. I didn't drink anymore, but I could still remember and miss the smoke and fire. The bottle was half empty and I didn't think they'd been laughing a lot.

"Same thing: answers. You know who gets the house yet?"

"Yes," Sarah said.

"Oh, Sare, we can tell him. Why not, for God's sake? Come and sit down, Mr. Fortune. Coffee? A drink?"

I sat on the beige leather and steel couch. It felt like sitting on air and butter. "The coffee looks good."

She poured the coffee. Sarah wasn't happy.

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"Does Gus still have a stake in the house?"

"No," Sarah said.

"Take the cash and run, that's my father," Debbie said. "A long time ago."

"How about Kevin Moore or Edgar Bowers?"

"No," Sarah said.

Debbie laughed again. "Uncle Lush and the cowboy are out in the cold."

"She left everything to us, Fortune," Sarah said. "Which means the house, okay? That should clear up any idea of our moving furniture to look for something."

"Not necessarily," I said.

"Wonderful!" Debbie said. "Detective work is fascinating!"

"Mostly plodding, listening, and checking. For example, your karate teacher isn't sure you were in the class that day, Debbie. Can you prove it somehow?"

"Why, I *talked* to him, for God's sake!" She frowned. "If he doesn't remember, I'm not sure I can. I was in a hurry to get back to the desert, didn't stop to talk to anyone else."

Sarah said, "Karate class? So you finally got to take one. Good for you."

"Finally?" I said.

"We both wanted lessons when we were kids, but Mom said no. Too masculine. I never did take a class."

"I don't remember that, Sare. I need it for a movie. Hey, maybe that's why I want the movie."

I said, "How about you, Sarah? Can you fill in the time you were away from your shop that day?"

"You know damn well I can't. I told the police."

"So you did. What about the house? Going to sell it?"

"Of course not," Debbie said. "We had wonderful times in that house, we couldn't sell it."

Sarah said, "We haven't decided yet, okay?"

"Sarah! You'll live in it, for God's sake. Free rent. I'll pay the mortgage."

"I don't want to live in it, Deb."

"Then we'll rent it. When we both burn out we can live there together."

"Renting is a big hassle. Tenants trash a house. We can keep anything we want from the old days, Deb."

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Debbie's exotic Hollywood face broke into that devastating smile: girlish, wistful, sexy, enticing, warm, and melting all at once. "Well, I guess you're right. But we'll talk about it."

Sarah looked at me. "Is there anything else, Mr. Fortune? Deb and I don't get together all that often."

"All right," I said. "The motive was triggered by her decision to sell the house. One of them killed her, moved the furniture to look for something, and put it back wrong."

Lawyer Ronald Dawes is a small, skinny man with weak eyes and a shy manner. This fools people. The weak eyes come from damage he took leading a platoon in Vietnam. When he came back he was top man in his class at Harvard Law, and in court he goes for the jugular and gets it.

"That's what I think," Dawes said.

We were in his office. All the windows are on the south side overlooking an ocean of red tile roofs that slope away down to the real ocean and the distant Channel Islands.

"She had coffee with the killer in the living room," Dawes said.

"To tell whoever it was about selling the house?"

"The final decision," he said.

"One of them trying to talk her out of selling."

We both sat and thought about what had happened when Carol Urbanski wasn't talked out of selling.

That was when I remembered.

Gus Urbanski sat again on the rickety deck, his chair at the edge where he could admire his panorama of sea, town, and sky. I held the snapshots out to him.

I said, "When you saw these, you said, 'I liked the house. Seeing it inside again, I remember.' As if nothing had changed in twelve years."

The wiry and muscular outdoorsman let his gaze move all across his vast view from his rustic cabin.

I said, "The killer knew about the back-door frame."

He stroked his gray beard, almost tenderly, and reached for the photos. "It's different, but not all that much. I shoved the dining-room table over under the windows so we could look out at the trees and creek, and the kids had a big space to play in. I bought that old futon couch and set it up in front of the TV, painted that blue coffee

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table myself. But that big recliner I never saw. We had a lamp and a table over in that corner."

"When you brought the three bears back for Debbie, did you buy a Goldilocks with them?"

He nodded.

I said, "The killer didn't want your ex-wife to sell the house, but the furniture wasn't moved to look for anything."

"Why was it moved?"

"Let's go find out."

Four dilapidated palms towered over a ragged brown lawn in front of the shabby gray three-story Victorian on the west side.

Sarah Urbanski didn't answer our ringing. Gus Urbanski had a key.

"She and I always got along," he said.

We went into a living room furnished with rugs, chairs, and cushions from half the world, and up a series of narrow corkscrew stairs. The apartment was more vertical than horizontal. The living room and a kitchen were the entire first floor, a dining room the second. An office/den/TV room was a half-level between the second and third floor. Two bedrooms under low eaves were the third floor.

"She says it's like living in a tower," Urbanski said. "Her own castle. Where is she, Fortune?"

There was no sign of Sarah Urbanski in the apartment. No Sarah and no struggle. The apartment as neat and orderly as if she'd just walked away.

"Look around," I said.

He found the Goldilocks behind an armchair down in the living room.

I found the telephone. "Give me whoever handles Debbie Urban. Damn it, this is urgent. Fred Merkur? Where? I don't care how private it is, if he wants a live client, you better give it to me fast!" I took down the unlisted number and dialed again. "Mr. Merkur? Debbie Urban's in bad trouble. Really bad, yes. I have to know about her karate class. What movie is it for? You're sure? All right, I'll get back to you."

I hung up and headed for the door. Gus Urbanski was close behind.

The house showed light under its old oaks and sycamores. I motioned Gus Urbanski to be quiet. We went into the lighted kitchen through the broken door.

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There was fresh blood on the kitchen floor, and a sound in the dining room. Faint, like something heavy trying to move.

Under the dining table, he lay on his back like a giant beetle trying to turn over, a deep gash on his forehead.

"Kevin?" Gus Urbanski said. Too loud.

I clamped my lone hand over his mouth. We listened. There was no other sound in the house. I felt the semiconscious Kevin Moore's pulse. It was there, but weak. He was going nowhere for a while. Gus Urbanski's face was white.

The living room was empty. As we stepped softly along the hall toward the lighted back bedrooms, I heard it. A soft, slow sound like a distant chant, or a mother crooning over her baby.

The first bedroom was alight, but empty, the boxes unmoved, the rows of toys untouched on the shelves.

As we turned to the second back bedroom, the low, rhythmic crooning changed to a high, bright voice.

"Everything has to be exactly as it was, don't you see? We'll live here again the way we did. Before . . ." The voice stopped as if confused. "Everything's in the same place it was. The table against the wall so Mom and Dad can see outside and we can play on the floor. The futon and the table and the TV and the whole family room the way it was so we can all watch . . ."

"Not the recliner," another voice said. A steadier voice. "We didn't have the recliner. All that was a long time ago. We're not kids. . . . "

"Let's go and climb the school steeple! The way we did every year, you remember?" And the voice changed again to the low dreamy singsong-like crooning. "Mom never liked me doing that. I was going to be a nurse. Mom cried when I didn't want to be a nurse anymore. I never wanted to make her cry."

I had reached the bedroom door. Sarah Urbanski sat on a chair, blood in her hair. Her hands were tied to the chair. Debbie Urban sat on the floor against the wall under the shelves of stuffed animals. Where her bed had been all those years ago.

"You didn't make her cry," Sarah said. "She just wanted you to feel guilty. She was good at that. She—"

"I made her cry!" Hard now, a fierce rage. "She hated what I was. Hollywood, the slime, the men! Sick and dirty! All Mom wanted was for me to be what I used to be. For all of us to be what we were before. . . . Before we changed . . . Before Dad . . . Before you . . . Before I . . ."

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Over coffee in the formal living room, her mother tells her the house will be sold. The safe walls, the happy days, will be gone forever. On the edge for who knew how long—the constant pressure, failed marriages, drugs—her mind snaps. The hammer is there. Or she goes to the kitchen for coffee and the hammer is there. One manic blow and she regains her lost childhood behind the secure walls where everything will always be the same.

Gus Urbanski walked past me straight toward his daughters. "Debbie, it's okay. We'll all help you. . . ."

I reached Sarah, cut her ropes.

Debbie lunged at Urbanski. She had the hammer. He took two hard blows on the shoulder before he could catch her wrist. She struggled like an insane animal, raging and crying. It took all three of us to hold her, take the hammer from her.

Suddenly she stopped, smiled. The girlish, wistful, sexy, enticing, warm, and melting smile.

"I know! We'll all go hide in the tree houses!"

In his office, Sergeant Marquez sighed. "Moore was watching them both, figured on some blackmail, but she belted him."

I said, "I think it started when Gus left her mother. Then, when the pressure built in Hollywood and things went bad, her 'happy' childhood became a final haven. That's why the karate class. There wasn't any movie."

"She rearranged the furniture," Marquez said, "went in and out, past and present. She washed the coffee cups, but left them in the basket and forgot the coasters. She broke the door where it was weak, but took her Goldilocks and rode her swing. She's still in and out. Sometimes knows, sometimes doesn't."

I said, "By the time she drove home to Malibu, she'd blacked it out. Until I appeared and she had vague memories, but wasn't sure what they were. Then Sarah wanted to sell the house."

"She called me to meet her there. When I walked in she hit me and tied me to that chair. She couldn't let me sell it. We were all going to live in the house together." The younger girl stood at Marquez's window with its view of the city and the distant sea. "The thing is, our childhoods in that house weren't all that happy or even safe."

"They never are," I said. "We just want them to be."

Or need them to be, at least the memory of them. But most of us don't have the desperate need to make the illusion real.●

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FIRST U.S. PUBLICATION

As one of the great writers of England's Golden Age of mystery fiction, Margery Allingham enjoyed widespread international publication. Therefore, it came as a surprise to us when scholar Barry Pike discovered a series of Allingham short stories never before seen in the United States. The following is the first of eight stories that comprise "The Darings of the Red Rose," a series of adventures featuring a society girl whose quest for revenge for financial wrong-doing leads her to act as a sort of female Robin Hood. The series was published from February 15 to April 5, 1930, in a British magazine called Weekly Welcome, *when the author was just twenty-six.* EQMM *plans to present two further "Red Rose" episodes later this year, but for the complete series readers should look for the upcoming book from Crippen & Landru Publishers, also entitled* The Darings of the Red Rose *(Summer, 1995).*

THE DARINGS OF THE RED ROSE

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

"Miss Connolly will be down in one moment, sir, if you don't mind waiting."

The dainty parlour maid closed the door behind her, and the Hon. Tommy Kempis was left alone in the softly lit, luxuriously furnished drawing room. The curtains were drawn, shutting out the soft rumble of traffic in the Mayfair street without. The gilt ormolu clock at the other end of the room proclaimed the hour to be half-past eight.

Thomas Kempis sat down on a little Louis XV settee, which was placed to one side of the fireplace where a fire blazed in spite of the

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earliness of the season, and spread out his long thin legs to the heat. He was a handsome young man not yet thirty, immaculately dressed in the most faultless of evening clothes. He took out a narrow silver case from his pocket and selected himself a cigarette which he lit and began to smoke, still staring into the fire, a faint smile of satisfaction on his wide sensitive mouth.

He was thinking of Betty Connolly, the girl he had come to see; the girl who was at once perhaps the most popular and mysterious of women in all social London. No one knew much about her. She had been left a fortune from some distant relation in America, that much everybody knew.

Even to himself, perhaps one of her closest friends, Betty had never spoken about her life before she came to London. She had been sponsored into the exclusive circles of society by old Lady Derry, but that silent and austere old aristocrat was not at all the type to gossip about her protégées. Apart from a vague idea that beautiful Betty Connolly came "from the North" no one knew anything at all about her.

Thomas Kempis was not curious on this point. During the months that he had known the girl she had become a part of his life, so much so that his only interest was in herself, her thoughts, and her affections. Still, he reflected to himself, there was something curious about her, a strange sadness which seemed to seize her at times, a curious rebellious expression which appeared in her eyes at moments when it was least expected.

Meanwhile, upstairs in her luxurious boudoir, beautiful Betty Connolly sat at her dressing table, her lovely head bowed over a little crimson notebook, the curious expression which Kempis had noticed was once again in her eyes. She was quite alone. Her maid had already gone downstairs, and although she knew that her escort was waiting, she still lingered over the little book.

Anyone looking in upon her there would not have found it difficult to understand why she had taken London by storm. She was not tall but inexpressibly slender, with a perfect figure, sleek dark hair which waved smoothly down either side of her pale oval face into a soft fashionable knot at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were blue and very clear. Hers was a typical Lancashire loveliness.

Lancashire. That was the true explanation of the mysterious expression which now saddened her face.

Before she had come to London only a few short months ago, she had been a penniless work girl in Manchester. But it had not always

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been thus. Betty had been born into an old North-country family known and respected for hundreds of years in the little village of Wellside, near Manchester. And then suddenly when she was eighteen years old a calamity had overtaken not only her own family, but all the wealthy, simple, home-loving folk in her district. The girl's eyes hardened as she looked down at the page of the little notebook.

On it there were written eight names, each one of them famous over half the world as representative of large fortunes.

These were the names of eight members of the same syndicate, that syndicate which, while keeping within the law, had brought Betty's own folk to degradation, poverty, and in the case of her own father and mother, to death.

When the unexpected legacy from an American relative had made her ambition possible, she had seized it, and come to London. For she had pledged herself to make them pay, these eight. She had made up her mind that each one of them should be made to suffer for the incomparable wrongs they had done.

The first name on the list in the little book was Barnaby Jonathan, the chairman of the syndicate, chief vandal of them all. Betty laughed to herself, and her little gold pencil hovered over the name.

"Perhaps," she said softly, "perhaps quite soon I shall be able to write 'Paid' to your name, Mr. Jonathan. I hope you got my note."

Then slipping the book into the dressing-table drawer, she locked it, and taking up a small crimson flower from a silver vase on the table, she slipped it into her bag and went downstairs to the drawing room.

She stood for a moment in the doorway smiling in at Tommy, while the young man stared at her in rapt admiration. She was radiant; he had never seen her look so lovely. No one would have dreamed that behind her smiling eyes there glowed fiercely the bitter fire of revenge.

"Tommy, you're a darling to come for me," she said, holding out her hands to him. "It's ever so good of you to take me, too. I'm tremendously grateful!"

He stood looking at her without speaking as if her loveliness had rendered him dumb for the time being. She met his gaze, and a faint flush tinted her pale cheeks.

"You're admiring my frock," she said hastily. "It is rather nice, isn't it?"

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She shook out the folds of her diaphanous white gown, which billowed out round her slender form from the long tight fashionable corsage.

"Beautiful," said the young man gravely, but it was not at the dress that he stared.

"I'm afraid you're going to be terribly bored," she went on lightly, slipping on the soft grey squirrel cloak which her maid now held up to her. "But do you know, as soon as I saw that invitation I simply couldn't resist the idea of going. "The Seven Stars diamond, doesn't that sound romantic?"

Her laughter was infectious, and he joined in with her.

"As a matter of fact," he said as they wandered through the hall to the waiting limousine which was to take them to their destination, "I should have to have gone to Jonathan's party tonight in any case." The contempt with which he spoke the name was not lost upon the girl. She glanced at him quickly.

"You dislike him?" she said.

Her companion shrugged his broad shoulders. "Naturally," he said. "There's not much to like about him, is there? It's not that I'm particularly snobbish," he went on, eager to vindicate himself. "It's not that the man offends me every time I look at him, it's the fearful stories about him in the city. He came from the North originally, I believe, and—"

"I know. Manchester way." It was the girl's voice which had interrupted him. They had entered the car by this time, and he turned to her curiously as she sat beside him on the soft grey velvet upholstery. Her voice had startled him, her expression bewildered him still more. Once again he caught a glimpse of that bitter sorrow in her face, that savage rebellion in her beautiful eyes.

She caught him staring at her and laughed to hide her embarrassment.

"That type of man always infuriates me," she said. "A man who has made his money out of the sufferings of others, a man whose beautiful mansion is built on the wreckage of a thousand little homes."

Kempis was surprised. He had seldom heard anyone speak with such feeling on a subject in which they were not personally involved. This remarkable girl became more mysterious and extraordinary every time he saw her. It was she who broke the silence.

"You said you would have come in any case," she said. "Why? Have you been bitten with the diamond fever also?"

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He shook his head. "No, it's more serious than that," he said. "I don't know if you realise it, but old Jonathan is doing a pretty dangerous thing in showing that jewel to everybody tonight. There's no diamond like The Seven Stars in the world. It's virtually priceless, but Jonathan gave three quarters of a million for it—half his fortune, people say.

"It appears that it has always been the old man's ambition to own this particular stone. Some people are crazy about their possessions, but this man is stark staring mad about his. He idolizes it. It has become a fetish with him. It means more to him than anything else in the world, and to gain possession of it he has sacrificed everything: his wife, his children, his employees, they have all had to stand aside while he went on piling up gold in order at last to buy this stone."

His companion nodded. "Horrible, isn't it? A man like that ought to be made to suffer for the incredible evil he's done in the world. But that doesn't explain, Tommy dear, why you had to come anyway. I thought it was only out of kindness to me that you were deigning to join in the throng."

The young man looked at her helplessly. "You always laugh at me when I talk to you about my sleuthing activities."

A faint smile spread over her face. "It's my plebeian mind," she said. "The idea of the younger son of an earl crawling about after crooks with a pair of handcuffs in one hand and a magnifying glass in the other always strikes me as being just a teeny-weeny bit comic. It's my appalling upbringing, I suppose. Still," she went on, laying a hand upon his arm, "I really am sympathetic in my heart. I know you've had wonderful successes already, and that Scotland Yard is beginning to touch its helmet when you go by. Do let me in on this secret. What's it all about? Surely Tommy," she clasped her hands in mock horror, "The Seven Stars hasn't been stolen before I've seen it?"

The man shook his head, and the little electric light with which the inside of the big car was illumined showed his handsome face to be dark and worried.

"Not yet," he said. "As a matter of fact, my friend Downham of the Yard came to see me this morning. This is absolutely between ourselves, of course. I don't suppose you remember it, but I was able to give him a good deal of help last autumn in the Eldora Case. He's never forgotten it, and this morning, as I said, he came to see me. Apparently old Jonathan has done some very shady work in his

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time, and his enemies are after him. Anyhow, he's got the wind up terribly. At first I refused to have anything to do with it, but Downham was very insistent, and at length I promised I would see what I could do for him. Anyhow, this is the thing that terrified Jonathan."

And even while he wondered at himself for taking this girl so much into his confidence, even though she was such an old friend, he thrust his hand into his waistcoat pocket and drew out the folded scrap of notepaper which had struck such fear into Barnaby Jonathan, millionaire, only that morning.

He handed it to Betty, who spread it out. It was a thick sheet of handmade paper, exquisitely perfumed, and on it written in a clear round hand these few lines:

> You will know the meaning of the Red Rose by midnight. There is someone who has not forgotten Wellside.

The girl raised her eyes. Her heart was beating furiously, but she did not betray her agitation.

"Is that all?" she said.

Kempis nodded. "Save that a small crimson rosebud was folded in the paper, there was no other explanation of any sort."

"I see," said Betty quietly. "And what was 'Wellside'?"

The man smiled. "That's what a lot of people would like to know. Old Jonathan swore he'd never heard of the place before but Downham had an idea that he remembered a scandal connected with Jonathan over some rather fishy business concerning the village of Wellside in Lancashire."

A faint smile appeared upon the girl's lips, and she turned her head away, but although he could not see her face Kempis had the uncomfortable feeling that that same rebellious expression that he had noticed in her before had again come into her eyes.

The First Red Rose

Mr. Barnaby Jonathan stood in his vast drawing room looking, as somebody rudely remarked, like a pig in a golden sty. Certainly, whatever his wealth had purchased for Mr. Jonathan, it had not brought him beauty. He was a heavy, unprepossessing man nearing fifty. All the arts of Savile Row had been unable to lend his vast form any suggestion of the waist he so patently desired. His large red face, surrounded by a circle of superfluous flesh, could never at any time have been handsome. He had small dark eyes, which spar-

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kled and twinkled greedily as he looked about him. But by far the most unattractive feature of this unprepossessing face was the mouth: small, cruel, and pursed like a string bag.

A glittering crowd filled the drawing room, although only a sprinkling of society folk had come. Only those who were interested in any new fad, however ridiculous, had accepted Mr. Jonathan's invitation, solely because they wished to see the famous diamond which had only lately come to England from one of the national treasure houses of Europe.

"I say, this place is getting on my nerves," whispered Kempis to Betty. The two had just entered and stood on the outskirts of the little crowd wondering how best to make their way to the host through the throng.

She laughed softly. "Never mind. You may be able to catch the Red Rose," she whispered.

Kempis glanced round him anxiously, but no one was in earshot. "Be careful," he murmured. "I assure you it's no joking matter, Betty. Anyway, old Jonathan doesn't seem to think so."

The girl followed the direction of his eyes and saw that the big heavy man at the far end of the room was glancing about him nervously, and in his small black eyes there was fear besides greed.

Suddenly he caught sight of the two and came forward eagerly.

"I'm so glad you have come to see my diamond." The financier bent forward without releasing the girl's hand from his flabby grasp. "It is in the next room. I have to be careful, very careful." Once again he looked behind him with a peculiarly jerky movement of his head which betrayed his apprehension for his treasure. "I have two detectives on guard day and night, but I have arranged a very pretty device for its safety. The key of the showcase in which it is displayed is here in my pocket." He tapped his waistcoat contentedly.

He glanced at his watch, a massive gold affair, chased and engraved with a thousand different designs. "It is nearly nine o'clock. At five minutes past I shall take you all in and you will have the honour of seeing the most wonderful jewel ever discovered in the history of man."

To Kempis's astonishment Betty held out her hand.

"I hope you won't think I'm awfully rude," she said, smiling at the financier, "but may I look at your watch? I've never seen anything so wonderful."

Jonathan was only too delighted to show any of his treasures.

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"Nice little thing, ain't it?" he said, dropping the incredible thing into her hand.

Betty turned it over. "Isn't it marvellous?" she said, turning to Kempis.

"Why—er—oh, yes, quite," he said dully, wondering at the same time whether she had taken leave of her senses.

"May I?" she said suddenly, and turning, slipped the watch into one of the man's waistcoat pockets. Mr. Jonathan laughed. "Not that one," he said, with elephantine playfulness.

"How stupid of me." Kempis could hardly believe his ears. Betty was actually laughing with this man, she who had professed to dislike him so much. The young man was bewildered, and would have carried off his companion to demand an explanation when a footman appeared at Betty's elbow.

"Miss Connolly? You're wanted on the telephone, madam."

Betty raised her eyebrows. "How absurd," she said, and added, turning to the young man, "excuse me a moment. I can't imagine what it can possibly be."

The manservant conducted Betty into the large library where the telephone stood upon the desk. He indicated the instrument, and then went out, closing the door behind him, and the girl realised with a little thrill of satisfaction that he expected her to find her own way back. She took up the telephone and spoke softly.

"Thank you, Marie," she said to the maid who had phoned her. "You have done just what I told you. Goodbye."

Then she hung up the receiver and moved noiselessly towards the door. She opened it and peered out. Luck was with her; there was not a soul in the corridor, and directly opposite her was the door which the plan of the house which she had obtained beforehand from her lady's maid, who had once been employed there, told her was that of the inner drawing room, the room where the jewel was displayed. She unfolded her handkerchief and took from it the little key of the showcase which she had taken from Jonathan as she replaced his watch. It had been a dangerous thing to do, but she was not considering danger just then.

Still holding the key with her handkerchief to avoid all chance of fingerprints being left on the steel, she advanced cautiously towards the second door. Very carefully she turned the handle, using a panel of her dress to cover her hand, once again to avoid telltale prints.

It was unlocked, and it swung open silently. As she peered into the room Betty held her breath. At first she could hardly believe

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her good fortune. She had come straight into the presence of the showcase door. The massive steel and glass safe was standing with its back to her between two heavy screens, which shut off all the other half of the room.

From behind the screens came the sound of low voices, angry voices. Betty stood listening, her heart thumping so loudly that she felt its very sound would betray her. Quickly she realised what was happening. There were two men on the other side of the screens, detectives. They were arguing fiercely between themselves over the inadequate gratuity given them by Barnaby. The front of the showcase, which was glass to display The Seven Stars, was covered with a black curtain which Barnaby Jonathan had arranged so that he could flick it aside at the appropriate moment and display his treasure to his guests.

In their preoccupation with their own affairs the detectives had not noticed the silent opening of the door. Betty knew that her one chance was to act, and to act quickly. Darting forward noiselessly, she slipped the key into the lock of the case, turned it silently, thrust in her hand, and her pale fingers closing over the great jewel, she drew it forth. Then, quick as lightning, she placed the rosebud which she had brought with her in its place, closed the safe door, relocked it, and slipped like a shadow from the room.

Once back in the library she found that she was trembling. The actual substitution had been so swiftly done that she had not had time to be frightened, but now that she stood in the library with the great glittering stone in her hand, she was desperately afraid. She pulled herself together valiantly, however.

Quick as lightning she opened her frivolous little bag of silk and ostrich feathers and took out a large ornamental box of face powder. With fingers now steady she carefully raised the lid and buried The Seven Stars in the soft cream powder, smoothing the surface down again, so that the jewel was completely hidden. Then she replaced the top of the box, slipped it back in her bag, and deliberately left the frivolous little thing upon the desk by the telephone. Then, gripping the key of the safe in her handkerchief she deliberately walked back to the drawing room.

The whole incident had taken less than five minutes.

Tommy was waiting for her by the door. The financier was still talking to the young man, and they both turned eagerly as Betty appeared.

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"My message was nothing at all," she said as she came up. "My absurd maid rang me up to tell me that I'd forgotten to put on my necklace in case I should fancy that I'd lost it. These girls are almost too thoughtful."

She was still standing on the polished parquet floor which skirted the luxurious pile carpet. As she stepped onto it she seemed to catch the toe of her delicate white satin slipper under the edge of the pile. She stumbled forward, and was saved from falling by Barnaby Jonathan, who caught her in his arms. She remained there only a fraction of a second, but long enough to slip the key back in his pocket. The next moment she was laughing in apparent confusion.

"How clumsy of me," she said.

Jonathan was all compassion.

"Miss Connolly, you're trembling," he said. "It might have been a very nasty fall."

His familiar tone exasperated Thomas, who linked the girl's arm through his own.

"I'll take care of you now," he said, and Betty, with a feeling of relief at her heart, realised that he had not guessed for an instant that her fall had not been purely accidental.

Meanwhile Barnaby Jonathan, who was followed by his guests, was advancing upon the great double doors which led into the inner sanctum where the jewel had been on display.

There were signs of suppressed excitement on all sides. There is something about a famous jewel which sheds a glamour quite different from anything else in the world. Betty took a deep breath. For the first time she saw the room from the front.

Barnaby Jonathan had something of a showman in his makeup. He had arranged the display of his treasure with the utmost care. Upon either side of the large steel showcase, standing with their backs to the screens, stood the two plainclothes detectives, quiet now, and standing at attention, quite unaware of what had happened only five minutes before.

The plate-glass front of the case was still shrouded by the small black curtains which Jonathan proposed to switch aside at the right moment, to reveal his treasure to his friends.

"Now," he said, his voice trembling with ecstasy, "look!" With a single sweep of his hand he drew back the curtain, and the showcase and its contents came into view.

For a moment there was dead silence, then a faint titter of hysterical laughter flickered through the crowd. It was silenced immedi-

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ately, however, by a howl of mingled rage and horror which echoed wildly through the room. All eyes were turned upon the financier. He was standing hunched up, his face thrust forward, and an indescribable expression upon his bulbous face.

Kempis seized Betty's arm. "Good heavens!" he whispered. "Look!"

The great showcase was empty, and lying upon the velvet cushion where the giant diamond once had been was a tiny red rosebud.

Jonathan swung round upon his guests and screamed at them like a maniac.

"No one leaves this room!" he shouted wildly. "I'll have you all searched; I'll have you all searched!"

A Debt Paid

It was two hours later when an angry group of well-dressed men and women filed out of Mr. Jonathan's ornate mansion. Their host was lying upstairs being attended by a doctor. A highly apologetic group of police officials had carried out Mr. Jonathan's threat. Since he had insisted upon it, every person in the house had been searched. Nothing had been found, and the indignation was unanimous.

Betty, standing on the bottom flight of steps in the front hall, turned to her companion, who, as a privileged person, had been allowed by the police to make his own investigations.

"What do you make of it, Tommy?" she said.

He shook his head. "It's astounding," he said. "The thing was done from behind. Someone must have got a duplicate key to the lock of the safe which opened at the back. Whoever did it crept into that room not five minutes before old Jonathan exposed the glass, for the plainclothes men are certain that they lifted the curtain at nine o'clock precisely and the jewel was there then." He paused and stared at her. "Isn't it extraordinary? It was quite easy to get into the room, of course, but almost incredible to believe that someone slipped in there, just behind the safe, unfastened the door with a duplicate key, put the rose in its place, removed the jewel, and then vanished. There are no fingerprints—nothing. It looks like magic to me."

Betty's blue eyes widened.

"How extraordinary," she said. "Let's get out of this. And yet—oh, Tommy!"

The annoyance in her face and voice was a perfect piece of acting.

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"Don't think I'm an awful fool, but I've left my bag behind. I'll go back for it."

"Nonsense." He spoke authoritatively. "I'll get it. Where is it?"

Just for a moment her heart failed her. If she should be found out now, who would believe her if she told them of her real reason for taking The Seven Stars? But Tommy was waiting.

"Where is it, dear? I'll get it," he said.

Glancing into his face, Betty knew that so far at any rate he had not suspected her.

"It's on the library table by the telephone. I left it there when I phoned," she said, keeping her tone careless with a great effort. "But I'd rather go myself, dear."

"Nonsense." He was off in a moment. She stood waiting for him, her heart thrashing against her side. It seemed ages before he returned, but he came at last, swinging the frivolous little thing from its slender handle.

"Infernal cheek," he said. "There was a policeman on guard outside the library door, and although I explained he wouldn't let me bring it until he had opened it."

Betty felt that she was going to faint. Then, as if from a long way off, she heard his voice continuing.

"Of course when the idiot saw there was nothing but a powder box, which he opened, and lipstick and a few shillings inside, he was tremendously apologetic. I was furious though."

Betty climbed into the car, and taking her bag, shut the door.

"Tommy, you're a darling," she said, smiling up at him. "But—but you're not going to see me home this evening because I'm desperately tired."

Then she leaned back against the soft upholstery and closed her eyes. The danger was past, and Tommy, her dear detective Tommy, had never dreamed of suspecting her for an instant.

The Hon. Thomas Kempis stood looking after the disappearing car, his face dark with disappointment. He had not taken his dismissal with very good grace, and finally hailed a taxi and went off to his club in the worst of tempers. He did not call upon Betty Connolly for almost a week just to show his resentment at her treatment of him. But at length he could keep away no longer, and calling upon her one morning was shown up to her boudoir where she sat in the most frivolous of crepe de Chine suits, reading the newspapers.

Kempis glanced over her shoulder. "Hello," he said. "What's more interesting than I am that you'd rather read than welcome me?"

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She smiled up at him over her shoulder. "Someone giving money away," she said. "Look."

Kempis read the column she indicated.

"Immense Sum Given to the Poor of Stricken Lancashire Village," ran the headline, and underneath. "Mysterious Giver Refuses Identity", "The crowded village of Wellside, Lancs, has been overjoyed by the mysterious gift of an immense sum to aid its well-nigh starving inhabitants. It may be remembered that some years ago during a financial crisis several thousand Wellside investors lost all they had."

"Jonathan was mixed up in that crisis," said Betty. "Serve him right he lost his diamond, don't you think?"

"Eh—oh, yes, rather, anything you like," said Kempis absently. He was not thinking of Jonathan just then. He took a deep breath and began to speak jerkily.

"Betty, all this week I've been sulking, and yet now I—I just felt I had to come and see you because—" He broke off. She had risen to her feet and stood looking at him with grave, anxious eyes.

"Tommy, darling," she said slowly, "don't—don't ask me now, please, because—"

The old haunting sadness returned to her face. "I've got something to do first, something I can't tell anyone about, not even you, an oath I've got to fulfill. Until that's done I can't promise anything, and oh, Tommy dear, I do want to so much."

The Hon. Thomas Kempis walked out of the boudoir, his heart beating rapidly. He had taken his dismissal more calmly this time. There was, he saw, a chance for him. Wild thoughts were surging through his head. There could be no doubt of Betty's sincerity when she had spoken of the pledge to which she was bound, the self-alloted task which she must accomplish before she even thought of herself.

At the very moment that he descended the stairs Betty Connolly opened a drawer in her dressing table and from it removed her jealously-guarded little red notebook. Deliberately she took the gold pencil from its slot, and with shining eyes and lips parted, printed the word "Paid" after Barnaby Jonathan's name. ●

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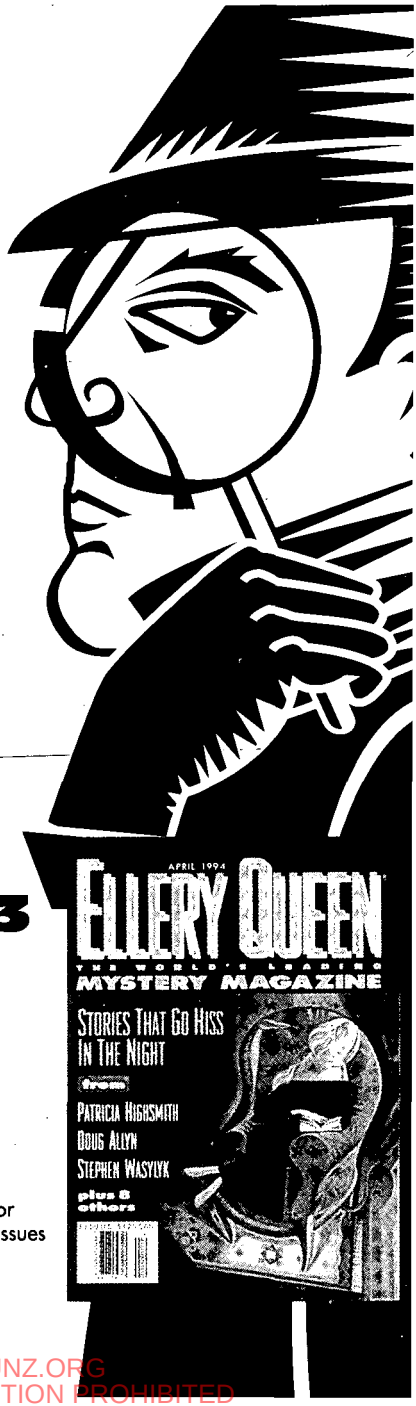

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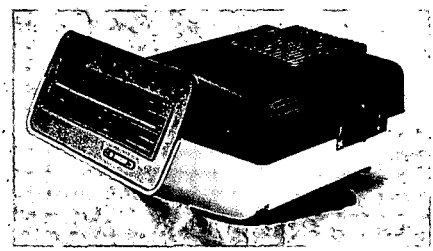

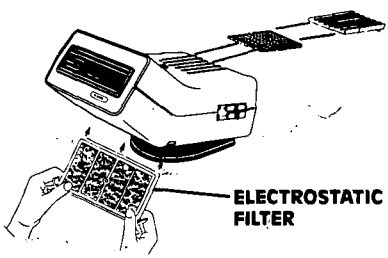

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